

LOVERS FOREVER

by Chrys Romeo

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PART 1
LOVERS UNDERCOVER

Chapter 1
Going Deep Undercover

Love can exist under any circumstances: time, place, whatever... it can happen. It can change a lifetime with its presence, with its light. Here's a story that happened in my life and convinced me of the truth that love is more powerful than anything... and it can exist anyway, anyhow.

When we got closer to the place where we had been sent someone shouted “ambush!” and we had to spread out and run. Bullets started raining above us from somewhere nobody could see. I threw myself on the ground, covering my eyes, as if that could have protected me from the bullets. After a while, the sound stopped. I looked up: the whole group had scattered on the field that was interspersed with steep trenches and valleys. I got up and walked aimlessly a few steps, when a field mine blew right next to me, throwing me over the edge of a pit and covering me with loads of dusty soil. I almost fell over in the large trench below. It was the edge of a crevasse in the ground, made by an earthquake or previous

explosions. I stood up, trying to step away from the slippery ground under my feet and I scattered the dirt from my head, adjusting the metal helmet. Suddenly, I heard a voice from below:

“Hey, who's there?”

Looking down, I noticed a girl. A soldier too. It wasn't a surprise that war also recruited girls – but it was astonishing to see her there, in the ditch. Her long hair the color of sand flowed on her shoulders, from underneath the helmet. Her greenish eyes were strangely and brightly staring at me.

“You covered me in dust” she said jokingly and smiled, scattering it off her uniform.

“How did you get there?” I asked her curiously.

“Probably the same way you almost did”, she answered and kept smiling.

That seemed funny and I laughed. She laughed too, then said:

“Will you help me climb out?”

“Sure”, I said and I extended a hand.

Her long fingers, the color of pale moonlight got my attention. When she stood next to me, I realized she was probably the same height and age as I was. We were both barely eighteen, not ready for war and not ready to be exposed to imminent danger, but we were laughing at it with that unconscious defiance that young people have, with unexplained certainty that we were somehow invincible and unaffected by whatever went on around us.

“Thanks!”

She sat down and started scratching off the mud from her boots.

I wanted to get out of the trench, but a bullet sizzled by my ear, so I crouched back in the ditch. I sat next to her, as she kept clearing her boots off with a stick.

“What unit are you from?” I asked her.

“Twenty. What about you?”

“Twenty one.”

She looked at me attentively. Her eyes so full of light astounded me.

The sounds of guns were still firing above.

“We might have to crawl our way out of here”, I said.

“Hmm... it doesn't matter, we're both done for”, she replied a bit displeased. “Let's go!”

We jumped from the ditch at the same time, crawling and rolling quickly under the flying bullets until we reached the forest. Then we ran to find our comrades among the trees.

I watched her get out of sight and I was a bit sorry that I hadn't asked her name. *“Anyway, we might not see each other again, so...”* I thought to myself.

My comrades were already gathered in line. The commanding officer saw me integrate among them and questioned me severely:

“You! where have you been?”

“There was an explosion nearby and I fell in a ditch and...”

“Take your hands out of your pockets and don't wander off from the group again! Understood?”

“Yes.”

Irritated that I hadn't said “Yes sir”, the officer turned his back on

me and ordered us to go uphill, to the top of the deep forest.

In the evening we arrived at the barracks that represented our quarters in that mountain. It had been a long tiresome way, so when we got there I was both hungry and sleepy, so I rolled in bed immediately. Early in the morning the deafening siren woke me up. I went to the bathroom, to find only ice cold water running in the taps, so I washed my face and got out in the yard. Everyone was already in line again. The commander frowned at me. The morning light was suddenly sharp and blinding.

"You're always separated from the group, soldier! Didn't you hear the siren?"

"I did."

"Then why didn't you move faster and get here in time for morning checkout?"

"I went to the bathroom."

The lines started laughing, their voices rising in the clear morning air.

"Silence!" roared the officer. "You go to your place now and don't make this happen again, you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, sir!"

"When a superior officer is speaking to you, you must stand up straight. Didn't you know that?"

"Yes sir, I knew that."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I couldn't remember."

"What do you mean, you couldn't remember?"

"If you're yelling at me I can't remember everything I must, sir."

The commander stared at me, trying to see if I was making fun of the situation or really meant what I said. He couldn't decide, so he shouted at us to go have breakfast:

"To the dining hall, soldiers! Move!"

The canteen was suddenly filled with noise, chatter and clinking dishes. I ate in silence, alone at my table. I didn't know anyone well enough: there hadn't been time for it. We had been gathered and rushed up the mountain to strengthen the defensive posts, before we could even glance at each other.

Then I heard more noise flooding from the doors of the canteen: a new group was coming in for breakfast.

"Unit twenty", someone said next to me and I looked up curiously.

They were mostly girls. The guys in the canteen whistled cheerfully, welcoming the pretty soldiers who seemed to expect that and not pay much attention to the atmosphere. They were hungry and only cared about the food at that moment, which they quickly placed on their trays. The commander announced that the new unit would be mixed up with ours, so we had to make room for them in the barracks.

I had just finished breakfast and I stood watching the girls unpacking in the yard. Suddenly, I saw the one I had met a day before, in the ditch. She was struggling with a backpack. I approached her.

“Hi. How are you? Can I help you?”

She looked at me and didn't seem surprised. She allowed me to help, agreeing to it somewhat tired:

“If you want to, you can take this backpack; it's a bit heavy.”

I picked it up.

“Which are the barracks we're staying?” she asked, looking around mostly bored and detached, as if she had seen enough and had had enough of it already.

“Over here. Those are the officers quarters. We're staying on this other side. Why did you get here so late? We arrived yesterday. Weren't you supposed to be here at the same time?”

My questions made her answer simply:

“I don't know. Our guide probably took a detour. It was a long way up the forest. Actually, it was quite a miserable track”, she said with disgust.

I opened the door to the barrack.

“You can choose your place, there are enough available. We've got bunker beds.”

“Where are you staying?” she asked me somehow disoriented and undecided.

“I'm over here, the top. The one below is free.”

“Perfect. I prefer the one below. I'll stay here, if you don't mind.”

She seemed to feel safe next to me, so she placed her backpack on the bed and sat on the edge, looking around in desolation. Then she suddenly remembered something and glanced up cheerfully:

“Let's introduce each other. We've met, but I don't know your

name.”

“It's Ky.”

She looked at me attentively and her eyes glistened with a deep light.

“Ky”, she smiled as she said my name. “It suits you. My name is Seloren.”

I shook her hand again – the same pale moonlight hand with slim fingers.

“Nice to meet you, Seloren.”

Her name was just as delicate and refined as her hands. I was amazed by the unusual girl that somehow had landed in the same forest, on the same mountain, in the same barrack with me.

She seemed tired and she took off her boots, stretching on the rough blanket.

The wooden barrack was empty. Everyone was still at the canteen.

“You didn't eat much” I noticed. “Don't you want breakfast? I could bring it for you.”

“That's nice, but I don't like the food they give us. I must be careful what I eat. I have some sandwiches in this backpack.”

“I'll let you rest now”.

I got out, as the soldiers were gathering for the instructions in the yard. We had to make a schedule for patrolling the forest and I didn't want to end up in the night shift, though it kind of happened anyway. As I was crossing the yard, the commander saw me.

“You! Are you wasting time wandering around? Don't you have

anything better to do, soldier?"

"I was going to check the schedule."

"I'll simplify the schedule for you: go to the canteen and help wash the dishes! Are you there yet? Move!"

I had to go to the kitchen, so the schedule was decided in my absence... and I got the night shift, of course.

At night the forest was full of lurking shadows, cracking branches, screeching owls, unexpected shuffling of leaves and we being startled at the slightest sound. We put our night vision goggles, so we at least thought we were safer somehow even though it was still unnerving, to stare into the darkness and walk on our toes.

Close to dawn I came back and climbed in bed. Everyone was asleep. Seloren was asleep too.

However, in the morning when the alarm went off, just a couple of hours after I had thrown myself in bed, I looked around and I didn't see anyone: they had already exited to the yard. I was still so sleepy that I put the blanket back on my head.

Then I heard a voice next to me:

"Ky, wake up. The alarm already went off."

"I know, I heard it", I said from under the blanket.

"So come on, get up!" she insisted. "It's been five minutes since the alarm."

I took off the blanket and looked around.

"Get up Ky", Seloren spoke again.

She was closing her backpack, putting a towel in.

I mumbled from my bed:

"I don't feel like going to the morning checkup. I've been on patrol last night and I'm sleepy. You go and tell them I'm asleep."

"You'll be in trouble. The commander will be furious." she warned me.

I yawned. She came next to my head.

"You really aren't coming out?"

"Nope. I want to sleep."

"And I'm telling you the commander will be furious."

"So what. Let him."

"As you wish," she said and went out.

She returned in less than ten seconds.

"The commander said you should come outside right now."

I realized I had to get out of bed and face the situation again.

I went outside. The commander was waiting in the yard, with everyone in line, staring at me. The yard was too silent, with too many eyes.

"Why didn't you come out when you heard the alarm, soldier?"

"I was sleepy."

"Is that how you talk to an officer?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't hear you!"

"No sir!" I shouted.

"No sir what?"

"No sir that's not how I talk to an officer, sir!"

The commander scrutinized me again, squinting his eyes to see if I was doing it on purpose.

I expected the worst to happen: thunder or lightning to strike me down. In the silence of the yard, the commander spoke word by word:

“I'll give you a chance: we're about to have shooting exercises this morning. You'll shoot first. If you don't hit the target in the middle – if you don't shoot a perfect shot, you'll serve in the canteen, wash the dishes then stay on patrol the whole night! Let's go.”

I went to the shooting field at the back of the quarters. They had lined up cardboard targets, white shapes with black circles and the middle point that I had to hit by all means.

I was given the rifle and I stretched down in the grass, aiming attentively. I could feel the eyes of my comrades and also Seloren watching me curiously. My hands were not steady. I was tired after the night shift. My eyes saw the target through a veil of fog. I pulled the trigger and I heard the roar of the bullet. It hit the cardboard, but not exactly in the middle.

The commander ordered immediately:

“There you go: to the canteen! And tonight I'll check how well you guard the gate and the premises!”

I stood up. I didn't know how I got the courage to speak. Maybe Seloren watching me gave me the audacity to surpass the borders of what I would usually do.

“That's not fair, sir.” I spoke firmly.” I was up last night too. I won't be much use if I don't get a few hours of sleep.”

That tipped the odds against me: having the nerve to contradict the orders.

The commander became furious, just as Seloren had warned me.

“One day of underground lockup for you! Take him away!”

Two soldiers grabbed me by the arms and dragged me to the cellar that was meant for prisoners. First they hit me a few times, because I didn't want to get inside, then threw a bucket of cold water on my head. And then I was left in the dark, to tremble the entire evening and the whole night. I was sitting down, crouched with my head on my knees, feeling the water still dripping on my back, the shirt sticking to the cold skin. I thought the hours were endless.

However, not after long, something unexpected happened: when the barracks were silent and I could only hear the owls screeching far away in the forest, everyone sound asleep, the door cracked open and someone slipped in.

“Are you here?” I heard an anxious voice.

It was her.

I looked up in the dark.

“I'm here”, I said.

“Then why didn't you say anything?”

“I just did.”

She came closer and her bright eyes glistened in the night towards me. She knelt next to me, touching my cold hands.

“What did they do to you?”

I shrugged carelessly.

“They threw water on my head.”

“What's up with your hands?”

“What's up with them?”

“They're freezing”, she said, bewildered that I couldn't figure it

out.

"So what?" I said in a matter of fact tone.

She looked at me curiously and then started smiling amused.

I asked her a more serious question:

"Have you come to set me free?"

"No", she answered.

"Then why did you come? And how did you get the door open?"

"Actually, I brought you a blanket", she remembered and unfolded it over my shoulders. "Here, to keep you warm. I had to bribe the guy at the door with a pack of cigarettes", she smiled.

"You're slick", I smiled too.

"Yeah," she admitted and her eyes glimmered in front of me.

"Thank you for the blanket."

"Don't thank me. It's the blanket from your bed. You'd better not lose it, or we'll both be in trouble. I couldn't let you freeze in here the whole night", she added. "It's cold in here, isn't it?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Yes, it is."

Then she suddenly laughed:

"You were great! I can't believe you confronted the commander that way. But why didn't you shoot right? I kept my fingers crossed for you!"

"You did?"

She stared at me sideways, her features more serious in the dark.

"Yes, I did."

"Well, it seems it didn't work", I grinned. "I'm in here now."

She smiled again. Then she said:

"Tell me something."

"What?"

"Did you do that on purpose? Get yourself in trouble, I mean."

"Do you think I like being in here?"

"I've been watching you yesterday and I think you have a talent for setting people off."

We both laughed.

Outside the guard moved and banged on the door.

She stood up.

"I must go. Good night."

"Good night. And thanks", I added as I watched her disappear.

The blanket made the night warmer. In the morning, when the door cracked open, I stepped outside to find the commander enraged again. He grabbed the blanket, taking it off my shoulders.

"What's this ? Where did you get it? Who brought this to you?"

I was blinded by the morning sun and the mountain fresh air, so I didn't feel like speaking right away. And I wasn't going to tell him. The commander turned to the guard who confessed, so Seloren was called to stand by my side.

"You're going to be on guard by the gate, both of you, for twenty four hours straight! Let that be a lesson for others who don't take orders as they are instructed!"

So it was decided: we had to stand and guard the gate together, Seloren and I.

I couldn't help but see it as a fortunate opportunity to spend more time with her. I enjoyed her company in a way I couldn't explain.

She wasn't very happy about it though: the idea of standing there until the next day didn't enchant her.

At first we remained by the gate, listening to the shouts in the distance, where the soldiers were exercising. We just stood there in silence, watching the mountain tops high above the forest: the steep rocks and the snowy ridges.

The sky was getting cloudy and soon it started to rain. Seloren retreated under the small roof of the gate booth, leaning the gun against the wall and holding the uniform around her, to keep warm. I remained there in the rain, water dripping down my steel helmet. I liked the sound of the raindrops against the metal: the clinking sound was cozy and soothing.

"Ky, do you want to get a cold?", I heard her ask me a bit upset from the booth.

"Yes", I replied and I smiled, closing my eyes and letting the rain fall on my face.

"Get some shelter over here. I feel a chill only by seeing you standing in the rain like that."

"Don't you like the rain?"

"No."

She looked around to the silent forest with the pines fluttering their needles and the fir trees whispering mysteriously. The rain made the forest seem more peaceful. Mist was floating above the trees, coming down from the mountain tops. It also brought a humid chilling

air.

"I think you haven't had enough freezing last night", she said a bit ironically.

I smiled at her.

"No, I hadn't."

"That means I struggled in vain to bring you the blanket, right?"

Her smile intensified.

"Well, it wasn't entirely in vain."

"Can you explain to me the use of it?"

"You only had the illusion of doing a good deed for a helpless soldier. As for me, I benefited in a different way: look how you're keeping me company as a result. I would have been bored otherwise, guarding the gate by myself. Instead, now we can talk."

And I grinned. She stared at me for a while, then she looked away. I didn't know whether she was glad or not to have me there. I waited to see if she chose silence or conversation with me.

In the yard, the commander was shouting again, his voice getting distant behind the barracks.

Then Seloren looked in my direction, asking casually:

"So, what would you like to talk about?"

I was thrilled she decided in favor of conversation. I thought about it for a second.

"Tell me about yourself."

"What would you like to know?"

"What's a girl like you doing in the army?"

"What do you mean, a girl like me? Like how?"

"You seem fragile."

"I'm not that fragile."

"You seem scared."

"I'm not that scared. However, coming here wasn't my choice. I was recruited for my medical training. I was in med school when the war started."

She stared at me through the rain drops, her eyes a bit shady.

"What about you? What are you doing in the army?"

"My specialty is gun powder, bombs, mines, artillery... stuff like that. I'm usually the one who cuts the wire before everything blows up."

She smiled amused.

"Did you ever cut the wrong wire?"

"Would I be here if I did?"

She laughed.

"It wouldn't surprise me, the way you're going about things. So what else do you want to discuss?" she inquired.

I glanced at her slim figure trembling in the humid chilling air.

"Have you ever been in love?"

She shrugged. The question didn't startle or upset her.

"Yes, for a day. I danced with him at a party, but I didn't see him the same way after that. It didn't last."

I wondered why she had liked that boy - and if it could have been me instead, would it have lasted longer?

I didn't say anything though.

"What about you?" she asked me directly.

“What?”

“Have you ever been in love?”

“No”, I said but it wasn't true.

However, I didn't want to tell her about the girls that I had taken an interest in before her. It didn't matter anyway. The war had robbed us of the perspective of dating or having fun. It was a luxury we no longer afforded. We had to stay alive: that was the main priority.

“What do you think about this war?” I asked her after a while.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, do you think it has a purpose?”

And I stared into the distance, at the mountain tops, as if to get a better perspective from the view. The mountains made me philosophical, as if something metaphysical was in the distance. She seemed to think about it, pondering on the answer.

“It might not have a precise purpose, but it's probably necessary to get over it.”

“How is it necessary if it doesn't have a purpose?”

She smiled.

“Like all things without a purpose, it's necessary to end. Maybe the fight in itself is necessary. We must defend something.”

“What would you have done if we had met as enemies in the battle?” I suddenly asked her.

She replied calmly, with the same undisturbed smile:

“I would have shot you.”

I didn't know if she meant it as a joke or as the truth. But I didn't care. I put the gun down and I started jumping around in the rain,

throwing my hands up in the air:

“Come on! Shoot me now!”

She shook her head amused, staring at me with her intense eyes shining brighter.

“You're totally nuts! “

It started to get cold, but I felt like playing. The moment had heated my mood. I stepped up to her with my fists closed.

“Guess which one has a hidden treasure.”

She played along. I knew she didn't have anything better to do anyway, but there was an attitude of complicity that I could already see about her. She was actually captured by my game.

“This one.”

“Here, you won!”

And I opened the fist, showing her a piece of grass.

She just smiled, not getting the point of it, but it didn't matter very much.

“And do you know what I've got in the other fist?” I continued.

“No. What?”

“It's the purpose of war. The meaning of it. Look!”

And I opened the fist willingly. The palm of my hand was empty. She looked at me as if to say again “*you're nuts*”, but she just laughed.

And then she said:

“I've got a riddle for you too. If you guess right, I'll tell you where you can find a book of poems. Now it's your turn.”

She extended her fists. I chose one of them. When she opened it,

I found a small pebble.

I was thrilled.

“Yay, I win! OK, so tell me. Where is the book?”

She looked at me pretending to be sorry for me, as if a difficult task was ahead and I wasn't aware of it. She showed me the group of trees down the path, below the gate.

“The fifth tree has a book of poems buried at its roots. Go and bring it to me, please.”

I was happy to run down the path. I counted the trees: one, two, three, four, five. Then I took out my army knife and I kneeled on the ground, where I started digging. Even if I knew it was just a game, I really believed at that moment that I would find a miraculous book hidden there. Suddenly, I heard a voice shouting at me from the gate:

“Hey soldier! What are you doing?”

I looked over my shoulder and saw the commander who had come to the gate and was staring at me, next to Seloren who was smiling subtly in complicity, signaling me discreetly to come back. I stood up and returned to the post. The magic was gone. The commander glared at me.

“Why did you leave your post, soldier? What were you doing there?”

“I buried a dead rat”, I said instantly, without thinking too much and Seloren looked at me with that admiring light again in her eyes, that I liked most.

The commander frowned.

“A dead rat?”

"Yes sir, it was here and it smelled badly. I had to bury it. I couldn't leave it around any minute longer."

"Very well, but don't leave your post again for anything! No matter what, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

I grabbed my gun from the ground and stood firm by the gate.

The commander left.

We started to laugh.

"Was it you who called him?" I asked her.

"No way! He startled me too. I didn't have time to warn you. I guess he was checking on us, to see what we're up to. He said you're weird."

"Really?"

"Yes. That's what he said."

"And you? What do you think?"

She smiled.

"I think you're out of your mind."

The way she said it sounded like a compliment. I took it as a good thing: it was better to be out of my mind instead of boring.

We spent the rest of the day playing cards, talking and sipping tea that we got from the canteen in exchange for Seloren's cigarettes. In the evening we were already feeling great about the whole thing and it was as if we'd been together for years, not hours. Something magnetic and fascinating had bonded us into a magical interaction. It felt right to be there together. Time went by so fast, we didn't even notice it was getting dark. Blue shadows extended from the trees and

the moon appeared through the clouds, above the mountains. Seloren was trembling.

“Do you want my jacket?” I offered.

“Thanks, but it's getting too cold. I'm calling someone to bring us our blankets”, she said.

“Anymore cigarettes to trade?” I joked.

“Don't mention it: I ran out of them.”

I came up with an idea. I had a small portable music player. I set it on a slow song, with the volume just enough for us to hear without waking up the whole camp. I put it down by the gate and got up. I extended a hand to her.

“Come on. Let's dance.”

She was surprised, but smiled. For a moment, she just looked at me with sparkling eyes. Then she got up and came closer. Her arms went around my shoulders. I held her waist and started to move slowly. We stared in each other eyes, feeling something thrilling between us and around, as we were dancing by the gate, guns set aside. Our movements matched instinctively, naturally, like breathing together. We couldn't take our eyes off each other. It was like a spell.

We didn't talk the whole time we danced, but simply smiled, lost in that locked stare that spoke more than anything. It seemed so captivating. It was like flowing with music. When the song ended, we reluctantly separated, but I could feel the warmth had risen to our heads.

“This dance made me feel better”, she said. “Do you know that song that played?” she asked me.

I knew the answer.

"It's *One more try.*"

She smiled, saying as if to herself:

"It seems I can't catch you off guard. This song's one of my favorites..."

"Mine too."

When we put our blankets around us, the barracks were turning silent. Everyone was asleep.

I let the music go on slowly, next to us.

I kept staring into the darkness. At night the forest was unpredictable and menacing. Every bush, every tree shadow could have hidden the danger of an attack; the barrel of a machine gun; the eyes of an enemy; the doom of imminent battle. Nevertheless, I wasn't startled or worried anymore. Being there with Seloren made the evening enchanted, and I felt fortunate to have that. Nothing else was on my mind, except the night ahead.

"Let's climb up on the roof of the booth", I told her and she agreed.

We had a better view from the roof and it certainly felt like an advantage, to watch the valley from above. The moon was getting in and out of the veil of clouds. We stood there with the rifles beside us, staring at the mountains. I wondered what she was thinking. I could see her profile in the pale blue light, breathing silently.

"It's beautiful up here" she said.

"It is", I said and glanced at her.

My heart was beating faster.

"You know," she said without looking at me, "they say that you get more appetite if you start eating."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll let you continue that", she said simply and turned her eyes to mine.

She was serious. I kind of guessed what she implied, but I didn't dare make a move. It was so tempting though... I reached out a hand and caressed her face. She smiled at me with a pleading light in her eyes, surrendering to my touch. I stroked her face and her hair for a moment. Her eyes filled with that overwhelming light, waiting.

And then she just asked me:

"Why don't you kiss me?"

The question was unexpected. I was surprised, but captivated.

"I don't know why", I answered because I really didn't know what was keeping me from it.

"Do you want me to do it?"

"Yeah."

She leaned towards me but the rifle got in the way. She laughed.

"Let's switch places."

I put the rifle on the edge and then she leaned above me and we kissed for a moment that seemed like an eternity wrapped in a second.

Kissing her was different from what I would usually imagine: it took me to another height, to another reality and a miraculous sensation.

When she looked in my eyes again we already belonged to each

other.

“Now we have a secret”, she smiled at me.

“We do.”

“You're mine”, she said in a way amused, yet halfway meaning it in a more serious manner.

I smiled.

“I'm yours, if the army doesn't take me away from you tomorrow morning.”

I noticed she still shivered under the blanket.

“Listen, let's put both blankets above us”, I proposed.

We stood together under the two blankets and it got so nice and cozy that we fell asleep a few times. I kept waking up, trying to remain awake to protect her, but I fell asleep next to her, time and time again. Even if the valley at our feet could have exposed us to unexpected trouble and danger, that sleep was the safest and most serene we'd ever experienced.

In the middle of the night it started to rain and I got down to look for something of waterproof material to cover us. I crossed the yard and walked to the canteen. Everything was silent and dark. I stopped in the kitchen, looking out the window at the water running down the glass, listening to the dripping sound. I was contemplating the rain when I heard soft steps behind me. I turned and I saw Seloren there, standing in the dark beside me.

“I should have known I'd find you in the kitchen when it's raining”, she whispered. “Come, let's go back to sleep”, she said and took my hand.

I picked some plastic covers and we returned to cuddle by the gate. I couldn't fall asleep immediately, as she was looking in my eyes, her stare glimmering in the dark. She was smiling endlessly. We just looked in each other's eyes, mesmerized, holding hands until we fell asleep. When I woke up she was still sleeping, so beautiful and unaware, with her head blissfully resting on my shoulder. I moved swiftly. I knew we had to return to our posts. It wouldn't have been a good outcome if anyone saw us sleeping instead of guarding the gate.

She was so deeply asleep that she didn't sense I was standing up. I leaned back and I kissed her on the cheek and then she opened her eyes slowly, yawning.

"Wake up", I whispered. "It's time to get up."

She looked around as if through foggy lenses.

"Is it morning already?"

"Yes, it is. We must get to our posts."

It felt like the most intimate thing, to have shared that peaceful sleep under those blankets with her, in total surrender. It was so enticing that neither of us wanted it to end, but we had to return to reality, or we'd be toast.

"Alright", she said standing up. "You'll have to help me climb down from this", she smiled a bit amused.

We returned to the gate. The barracks were waking up. The noise from the canteen was rising above the forest. A truck was brought to the front of the yard. And then there was an announcement from the officer in command.

"Some of you will have to move closer to the front line, which is

higher up the mountain. The enemies are pushing the battle this way. We must stop it before it reaches the towns in the valleys. We're here for this purpose. There's a list and the ones who find themselves on it must get in the truck and be transferred to the next defense point. Here it is!"

He pinned a sheet of paper on the fence, next to the truck.

Soldiers came to it, reading the names to discover if they had been chosen to go: some left cursing and frowning, some were relieved to not find themselves there.

"I guess we should check it out too", I said, looking over the gate to the fuss and noise around the truck.

Seloren didn't seem to care either way.

"You go and look for me too. I'll wait here."

I went to the list, a bit worried. I didn't want our story to end. I didn't want either of us to leave. But I had to read the names. The ground sank under my feet when I saw her name written there. I read it a few times, just to make sure: there was no mistake about it. She had been selected for the front line. It seemed so unfair, to suddenly find her, to discover so much happiness with her and yet our time to be so short together. And I didn't know how I would find the words to tell her the news. I returned to her, dragging my feet slowly.

When she saw me come, she remained indifferently calm, but she looked away to the mountains.

I stood there next to her, swallowing my words.

"I'm on the list, right?" she said, without looking at me.

I couldn't lie to her.

“Yes. Your name is there.”

She shrugged and turned to look at the truck.

“Well, I might as well go and get ready.”

I watched anxiously as the truck was being loaded with soldiers. I watched painfully how Seloren brought her backpack and threw it in the truck, getting ready to join the selected group. She turned around to look at me. The sadness in her eyes almost brought tears to mine. I couldn't speak. I tried to smile at her and somehow she smiled too.

“You should see your face”, she spoke suddenly more detached, as if she wasn't really leaving.

My sorrow had taken hers away.

“I'll find you when the war is over”, I promised her.

“We'll see each other again, I'm sure.”

She jumped in the truck that had already started its engine. She only leaned down briefly to get a kiss from me.

I watched helplessly how the truck set its wheels in motion, going past the gate and starting up on the forest trail among the trees, getting more distant with each moment, almost lost out of sight. And then I suddenly reacted to the impulse in my heart: I started running after it. When I got closer she extended her hand and helped me jump inside, smiling again with that admiring light in her eyes:

“You're totally nuts!”

The barracks remained behind us.

I sat there next to her in the truck, as the other soldiers were staring at us. Some of them were more preoccupied and worried about their fate ahead, others were just glancing curiously, but it didn't

matter to me. I was relieved to be by her side: I couldn't care less where the truck was going. We held hands like happy children.

“Now what?” she asked me.

“I'm coming with you.”

“You're serious.”

“Absolutely.”

“I should have expected that from you”, she added, laughing. “You should have seen yourself running after the truck. That was something else!”

I laughed too.

“I ran fast, didn't I ?”

“You did, Ky. “

Chapter 2

Lovers Defying War

I often thought, looking back, that our story could have very well ended right there: when I ran after the truck and joined her on the way to the front line. If I hadn't done that, it would have remained just a simple memory of passing each other by. I sometimes wondered, during the many years of her being lost to me in the world, what if our story hadn't started in that forest when we hardly knew who we were and what we were doing with our lives? I wondered if I could have been the same person, had I not met her then. I had been uncertain of many things about myself until I encountered her. She had brought that absolute and undeniable liberation to me - to be exactly who I was. It happened in the same way a man who's condemned to be hanged is saved by a girl who agrees to love him. She saved me from the mist of not knowing for sure if I might be accepted as myself, or what I deserved in life, as far as love was implied - and how I would confront the world and its wars to affirm or defend it. She cleared that from me forever, in the same way the clouds lifted off the mountains and drifted from the clear blue sky, dissipating into eternity. Her love had seen and lifted my soul with undeniable certainty. I ascended to a level of confidence that there was so much more to life than I'd imagined. Everything was possible, any miracle could happen, each

day was a gift. There was no way back after loving her: I was free to be myself in a new discovered existence and nobody could take that away, ever again.

Before I met her I didn't care if the war hit me with a bullet. The moment I found myself running out of breath to be with her, that decisive moment defined the rest of our story and my involvement in the war of life. As I was sitting in the truck, happily holding her hand, not caring about anything else that was going on, I knew we had started on a new path ahead of us and we were inseparable, no matter what. Life and the war would contradict me many times after that day, but I was still right about it, beyond everything. There was a meaning to us being together that surpassed the war that was going on. An everlasting universe of infinite light appeared between us, overwhelming in intensity, anytime we looked at each other. It was something so right that kept the battle far away, even if we were in the middle of it.

When we arrived at our destination we were already tired and sleepy.

The camp was high on a plateau, surrounded by tall trees, but it was much colder than the forest below and there was also snow everywhere. We jumped down from the truck and then just stood there, holding hands, looking around. We didn't know what was going to happen, what was ahead of us or what unknown danger could have tumbled down from the rocks and mountain tops that seemed much bigger and closer to where we were. I held her hand and felt her fingers tighten the grip around mine. We were together and that was

what mattered most.

“Get inside the tents! You'll receive white camouflage uniforms, because from now on we're hiding in the snow”, the officer announced.

The camp was made of big white camouflage tents that barely kept out the cold air. We got our new uniforms and went to find shelter inside. We chose two bunker beds, just as we did at the barracks: mine at the top, hers sheltered under it. We didn't talk very much, as we were sipping the soup from the cans that were distributed around.

And then I asked her, as I was staring down into the bowl of soup:

“Did you mean what you said, at the gate?”

She looked confused.

“What exactly, from what I said?”

I smiled. I needed to light up the atmosphere.

“About the book of poems. Was there really a book of poems under the tree?”

She suddenly smiled and her eyes brightened instantly.

“Now you'll never know, will you”, she said playfully, with teasing irony.

“I'll go back and check it out tonight.”

“Don't you dare.”

I finished my soup and put down the bowl, then I stood up, looking determined.

“I'm going right now.”

She glanced at me a bit alarmed and grabbed my sleeve.

“Ky, sit down! I'm serious!”

"I want that book."

"You're nuts, they won't let you!"

Then she saw my smile and shook her head, letting go of my sleeve and running her hand through her hair, with a deep breath of relief.

"I almost believed you! You scared me."

I sat down next to her, still amused.

"Don't worry, I'm not going... not right now anyway."

"It's not funny", she added.

"I guess I'll have to write that book myself and give it to you one day."

"I'm sure one day you will."

She looked in my eyes and smiled again. And there was a deep confidence in the light of her stare, something so absolutely certain, as if she believed in me and my words beyond anything. I was amazed at that confidence and stood there mesmerized, immersed in that moment that took us to a higher realm, above the war, above everything. Years later I would remember that light in her eyes and yearn for its unspoken miraculous truth.

Outside, the sound of running boots on the frozen rocks became a rush of shouts and hasty noises, metal and wood, crates and screeching equipment in the snow. Someone came in the tent, rushing us out:

"Let's go! We've got a mission to do right away!"

In front of the tents there was a group planning to go up the snowy ridges.

“The enemy intercepted our transmissions and sabotaged the convoy of supplies down the mountain. We need to blow up their radars.”

I was chosen to go, since it was my specialty to install or defuse explosive devices.

Seloren remained by the tents. She was asked to help prepare the first aid tent for the wounded, in case there would be any.

I grabbed my tools and left with the mission group, climbing the steep snowy rocks. It was almost sunset and the snow reflected the colors of the horizon, pale shades covering the silent ridges, huge teeth of stone rising to the sky. Over the edge we saw a high antenna, surrounded by a barbed wire fence.

“Get down” the officer whispered.

We lay in the snow, feeling too cold get to our bones.

“Move slowly. We must cut through the fence and blow up that junk.”

That junk was actually a steel tower. It didn't seem to be guarded, or so we thought.

We started crawling towards it when the first bullets flew through the air. The sound of scattered snow was worse than the gunshot. You could never know where the next hit would be.

“Get back! They've got a sniper up in the cliffs!”

We rolled quickly over the edge. A few more bullets hit someone in the leg. The sound of broken bones was followed by his screams. We grabbed the soldier and dragged him back to camp, leaving a trail of bright red spots in the snow. Someone had to stay behind to cover

up the tracks.

“We'll try again after it gets dark”, the officer said frowning and we were left waiting for the night hours.

When we returned, the camp was under alarm, from hearing the shooting guns. We took the soldier to infirmary. Seloren was there, waiting to deal with the situation. I only saw her for a moment and we exchanged glances. She was a bit worried, but didn't say anything aside from “Be careful”. I didn't want to add to her worries, so I just let her do her job, as she got busy immediately.

At night the mission was on again. We went back to the radar up in the cliffs. When we got to the edge of the mountain ridge we paused. I didn't expect it to be entirely my responsibility, but I was chosen again to take action.

“You go alone from here”, the officer told me. “We'll cover you in case they notice. We've got the machine guns ready.”

I rolled in the snow, down to the valley. The sense of danger was making my ears pick up the slightest noises. I wished there could have been owls instead of that swishing sound of the snow. Darkness could have hidden one sniper or ten of them as well. I tried not to imagine the guns pointed in my direction. My heart was racing in my temples. The snow was completely dark: not blue and not even shady. The moon remained behind clouds. I had a sense I was being watched. I stopped and listened. I was sure I could hear the finger on the trigger behind the cliffs. Then the bullet came through the air, flying by my head. I put my face in the snow and my hands above me. I stood still for a few seconds: I knew if the sniper had night vision, I wouldn't

stand a chance. The valley would expose me, had I moved. Breathing in snow for a few minutes, I decided there was no way back: I could only advance. So I started crawling slowly. The bullet had been random. I was almost sure it had been fired without night vision. Then a second bullet hit the snow near me. I rolled over quickly: only a few meters to the fence. Another bullet missed me and I was by the wire, cutting it fast. My hands were trembling a little. I was afraid I'd never see Seloren again. I crawled under the fence, running to the steel antenna. I took off my backpack with the detonation devices and placed them in the snow. My position was inconvenient for the sniper. I realized they had been shooting from only one angle. I was suddenly angry at the war itself. "Politicians start wars and lovers have to end it" I thought bitterly, as I was connecting the wires. I didn't want to miss my chance of being alive to enjoy the love I'd just found, only because of some irreversible feature of human race that needed constant confrontation and conflict. "We should be better than that, but we never were, in our entire history", I thought and clicked on the countdown detonation switch.

I had to get out of there faster than I had come.

As I rolled in the snow, the bullets started flying by again.

"Come on, hurry up!" the others shouted from beyond the ridge.

Then the explosion flared in the night and deafened our ears. The steel tower leaned and fell over in the snow, among flying debris and flames. We didn't have time to stay there and enjoy the victory. Bullets were roaring from everywhere. There was no point firing back in the dark, at unseen enemies. We headed back to the trail.

I didn't even feel the burn on my right temple. I was so determined to stay alive, I hardly noticed I had been hit. It was only when I got to the camp that I saw the blood dripping by my ear. I was sent to infirmary and as I entered the tent I smiled at her, relieved to see her eyes again. I was so glad to be alive, by her side.

She was instantly preoccupied.

"Sit down here, please."

"It's nothing. It's just a scratch", I said simply.

"Yeah right, if you say so. Sit still."

She wrapped my head in a bandage, with delicate and careful gestures.

"The crazy brave soldier", she smiled in the end, grabbing my collar in her hands and staring in my eyes.

"I'm not brave" I said. "I'm just lucky to be here."

"Shut up..."

She leaned and kissed me. I felt her hand go behind my neck, as her fingers went through my hair, stroking it gently for a second, which turned me on, sending a thrill through my spine. As I was sitting down, she almost sat on my lap. We were alone in the tent – for the moment anyway. She moved to get closer, breathing in silence. I let her do whatever she desired. I knew she was moving, while her hands touched my legs. I looked up in her eyes, but she spoke in a low voice:

"It's better you don't look."

"Ok, I won't."

I wondered if she was going to take off something really soon, but then there were voices outside the entrance and she retreated at

once. I got up. The powerful desire still lingered around us. We went reluctantly in different directions, the space between us like the deep water of a lake, reverberating with magnetic power.

It was close to midnight when we returned to our quarters. The camp had to turn off all lights, so we just stood there in the dark, in our bunker beds, under the rough blankets, ready to fall asleep. It was cold. I was sure Seloren was awake.

“Seloren... are you sleeping?”

She yawned.

“Not anymore now. What?”

“I don't know... I wonder... It doesn't matter.”

“Did you wake me up just to be silent?”

She raised her head, resting on one elbow and looking up.

“Say it, Ky. What's on your mind?”

“Do you think we'll be together after this?”

“I want to see the war over first”, she replied, not answering my question. “I hope it's just an episode and we'll get on with our lives.”

I remained silent. I didn't know what her words meant, so I didn't say anything anymore. I wondered if I was just an episode for her too. I wondered if her life was a sequence of separate distinct episodes and she was eager to get from one to the next, leaving behind any past experiences. In the many years of her absence I would often remember those words: “just an episode”... and I would be haunted by them, resigned to accept that version of our story, that my love didn't matter to her.

She sensed that something was wrong. Her voice became softer:

"I was so anxious waiting for you today. I hoped you'd be back safe."

I still didn't say anything. She continued:

"Ky? Tell me a poem. Poems are a good remedy against anxiety. And they're a better alternative to this war..."

I thought about the poems I knew.

"I wandered lonely as a cloud..."

She laughed.

"Come on, not that one."

"Don't you like *Ode to the Daffodils*? I learned it in school, in English class."

"You're good."

I smiled.

"I know, right? How about *No man is an island*?"

"I'm not sure I want to know what follows."

"Okay, here's a better one:

*somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes have their silence:
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me
or which i cannot touch because they are too near"*

Seloren was listening, but I didn't continue. She inquired:

"And then? "

I confessed:

"I forgot the rest, but I like most the last line: *nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands*

That's E.E.Cummings."

"Let me guess: English class again?"

"Yeah. What about you? Can you recite a poem?"

"I don't know... I only know lyrics from some songs."

"Those are good enough."

"I'm not reciting anything. I won't compete with you... You're the master of words."

"That's true. Yet you're the science expert. The camp relies on you to find a cure for the damaged troops."

"It gives me anxiety to think about it."

"You can focus. I'm sure you're doing very well."

We stood there in the dark, thinking in silence. And then I heard her again, in a different tone:

"Will we ever get home?"

"Sure we will", I said and I wanted to sound certain of it.

She looked up. I could feel her bright eyes in the night, fixed on me, shining intensely.

"Ky...? I'm cold. Please come here, next to me."

As I was hesitating, she added:

"Please ... for us. I wish we could get away from this place and be alone together. Yet this night is ours anyway. Please come here. Do it for us..."

Her words "*for us*" convinced me instantly. It was an irresistible invitation and the idea of "*us*" melted my soul in a blink of an eye. The

soft yet decisive and pleading tone of her voice was also impossible to say no to. Her desire was implied, steady and so overwhelming it couldn't be concealed from her eyes, even in the dark. She seemed more daring than me, taking that risk in that big dorm where we weren't alone. I suddenly didn't care who else was around us anymore.

I took my blanket and stepped down, slipping under the covers next to her. We stared at each other for a moment.

“Roll up above me”, she whispered.

I covered her body with mine, staring in her half closed eyes. She let me kiss her endlessly, slowly breathing together. I held her and she melted in my embrace, anticipating it as if since forever. Our embrace awakened in my soul an infinity of unspoken and unwritten poems, the most poetic anyone could envision with the eyes of the soul, more than words would be able to capture - for what was poetry anyway, other than the art of unfolding the meaning, writing the unwritten and wording the wordless significance only to redefine it speechlessly, erasing words into infinite awareness and absolute amazement... being alive, inspired by absolute bliss.

The next morning arrived with sunlight over snow, making it dazzling bright.

We woke up confused and sleepy, as if we were just arriving on that mountain from another planet. It was hard to leave that warm embrace to step out in the snow, but we had to do it.

On that day we were told we had to wait for new orders. So we were rather free around the camp. I was given a small notebook with

blank pages and told to make a list, to estimate how many land mines we might need to secure the camp around us. I measured the area, counted the steps, figured out the number. I sat down in the sun, made the list, then stared ahead, at the blank pages in front of me. I was tempted to write something. I wanted to write a poem for Seloren, but my mood was not lifted enough after thinking about the land mines. So instead, I started writing a story about the war and two teenagers falling in love.

Seloren was just coming from the infirmary tent when her eyes spotted me scribbling in the notebook. She was immediately interested. She came closer.

“What are you writing there?”

“Oh, nothing important.”

She grinned with her usual irony.

“Yeah, I bet... Let me see!”

“Not yet. In a minute. It's a story, I have to finish it.”

I had to hide the notebook behind my back, as she was peeking at it, fascinated by my handwriting.

“Let me see, please.”

“I'll let you read soon. Just a minute more.”

“Okay then, I'll wait.”

She found the trunk of a tree nearby and sat down in the sun, her head back, closing her eyes as the light was warming her face. I looked at her, suddenly more inspired and I started writing faster. When I ended the story, I handed her the notebook.

“Here, you can read it now.”

She opened it and as soon as she started reading, she was totally captivated. She smiled, then laughed, then ran her hand through her hair, from time to time raising her eyes to look at me with a mixture of amazement, surprise and enthusiasm. At one point, tears started streaming down her face, rolling across her delicate skin, and I simply stood there, completely stunned, speechlessly watching the way she was affected by what I had written. It perplexed me how much it changed her feelings, overwhelming her with emotions. In the end, she looked at me with her clear eyes full of tears, yet still smiling, a smile that brightened her entire being, as if her soul was overflowing. I couldn't have described her at that moment: it was a sight that words could never portray.

“When did I die for you?” she asked me simply, with such love in her voice that I instantly regretted that ending.

I was already sorry I made the girl get shot in the narrative. At the time it had seemed more significant to show that war had devastating consequences, but I already wished I had written a happy ending instead. Years later I still wished I could have given it a different perspective.

My answer was just as inconclusive:

“You didn't die, but metaphorically speaking, we began another chapter when we came here.”

She kept staring at me with that admiring light in her eyes. I was glad she had enjoyed the story so much, despite its final downfall that I couldn't change anymore at that point, even if I wanted to.

“This story was written for me”, she said very convinced, as if

she knew that truth better than myself. "I don't think you realize that, but you wrote it for me. I don't think anyone else would understand it the same way, or see its meaning. Can I have it? Can you give me this notebook?"

I smiled.

"Sure! You can keep it."

As much as I wished I had chosen a different ending, I was however glad that it made her happy to have it. To my amazement, she seemed absolutely thrilled to keep the story. She held the notebook to her chest, as if it were a treasure, and placed it carefully inside her backpack.

We didn't have enough time or permission to enjoy each other. Seloren wanted to be alone with me, and I felt the same, but we knew we had to wait until the war would be over. The army made our schedule and forbid our interaction. Yet we found a way to be together, even under the strict surveillance of the officers. When we were lined up in the morning we made a habit of giving each other folded scribbled notes, with messages that were like little secrets that we carried with us through the day. Our love surpassed the world around and we shared it as if our complicity was invincible, unbreakable, magnetic and everlasting, influencing us each day to be peaceful and happy, in an undercover correspondence, an exchange that gave meaning to our lives. We went on endlessly about it, keeping us connected even when we were apart. I read her messages with delight: *I need you or I miss you, I was thinking of you yesterday, let's go to a hotel and get a room away from here, what if we could*

get away together, or even let's do it in the bathroom – that one surely made me smile. We imagined we could be free to do as we wished, which was to share that love that we had to camouflage from the army by easily sneaking around with it, as others were unsuspecting of how deeply we felt and how close we dared to be together, under the ongoing scrutiny and orders.

If we ever got married, I think it would be cool to go to parties and act as if we're just getting to know each other, pretend we're falling in love all over again. We'd be shy, holding hands, as if we're discovering each other once more, taking our time with that, Seloren wrote on a piece of paper. *Let's get an apartment together,* she wrote another day and I imagined what it would be like, a serene, peaceful place where I would be with her, as I couldn't get enough of her presence.

I enjoyed reading her fantasies, drifting in dreams we created for each other. It was like a coded game, speaking about a possible future as if it was waiting for us, coming very soon. I also wrote longer letters for her, about how much I wanted us to get away from the war and travel together wherever we would like, wherever the road would go.

It was all we had: dreams of a future where we could be free to love each other. The feeling was so real and we were so convinced we would be undeniably and irreversibly together, that we felt invincible against the war.

One day she confessed to me:

“With you I learned that love is love, no matter who you love or where you are. Love is the same, no matter what.”

I didn't think our love was like any other, but I was glad she considered she had understood something important, a truth of life that was revealed only from our being together. If she thought that love could exist no matter what circumstances it faced, then we had a chance for the future.

We thought we would forever share that feeling, defying everything.

However, it wasn't as everlasting as we believed it would be. One day I had to go on another mission to install mines in the snow, around the area of the camp. When we came back we found the camp torn upside down: in our absence the tents had been devastated.

Seloren was gone from the camp. The enemies had tracked us down, avoided the mine traps, shot the guards, stolen our equipment and taken the medical unit as prisoners. I was overwhelmed by the fatality of the event. Somehow, I thought it was my fault: not placing enough mines around the camp. I felt as if I was being punished. I blamed myself for not doing my best to keep her safe. I suddenly realized that my life would never be the same without her. I could not see myself go on in her absence. I was pacing around the torn tents, feeling I would go mad if I didn't do something immediately.

"We've got to get them back! We should go right now!" I shouted desperately to the others.

"Calm down, soldier! We'll search for them, but we can't do it in daylight. We'll wait for the dark."

I had to wait.

It seemed like centuries until the night came.

We tracked the signal from the stolen equipment and went over the cliffs, to the broken antenna. We stopped at a distance. Everything seemed too quiet. The silence was hiding something: we could sense danger. Something was not right. And then we distinguished a silhouette in the snow: Seloren was tied to the broken antenna, at the sight of the explosion. I felt my breathing stop and my heart froze instantly.

“Give me the binoculars!”

I looked through the night vision lenses: there she was. Seloren was tied to the broken metal structure, her hands behind her back. I noticed something else: a belt of wires around her waist. I put down the binoculars, almost ready to jump and run towards her. The officer grabbed my arm:

“Be careful, soldier. It's a trap.”

“Let me go! I can do it, I can defuse the explosives!”

“They want you to go there. They might detonate it the moment you get close.”

“I don't care! I have to try. I can't sit here and do nothing!”

The officer looked at me. I was too determined. I couldn't sit and wait any longer.

He let go of my arm, so I moved ahead in the snow.

I rolled downhill as fast as was physically possible. At that moment I felt the boundaries of my strength become surreal, my resources endless, my energy fueled by the night above. I expected bullets to fly by, but there was only silence. The silence was worse than guns.

Seloren saw me approach the broken metal tower. Her eyes glistened in the dark.

“Don't come any closer! Stay there, Ky!” she whispered alarmed.

I didn't listen to her. I kept moving, crawling, rolling until I was near her.

I saw the countdown timer on her belt, the screen with red numbers running fast.

“You can't defuse this. They made sure of it. We'll blow up.” she warned me.

“If we do, at least we blow up together”, I said through my teeth and I examined the wires, intensely concentrating on their color stripes: blue and yellow or red and green? It had to be red. It could have been yellow. The darkness made it difficult to distinguish. I looked up at Seloren.

“Are you scared?”

“Yes...”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Then you shouldn't be scared.”

I glanced at the wires again. The colors were confusing. My hands were trembling. She trusted me, but I didn't trust myself. I couldn't tell her that.

“Two minutes”, she announced.

“No problem. I've got this.”

I thought I would take a chance: cut the blue or the red?

I couldn't ask her.

"Roses are red, violets are blue..." I said to myself.

Seloren smiled.

"Are you nuts?..."

The countdown had one minute left. I tried to make a decision.

"The grass is green, daffodils are yellow..."

"Ky, we've got thirty seconds!..."

"I know."

"Twenty!"

"Okay, okay!"

I closed my eyes for a moment. Green, yellow, red, blue... and then I cut the wire.

I waited. The countdown had stopped. We were still alive.

Yet I had one more problem to solve. I looked at the other timer: approaching fifty seconds fast. The wires were both black. That was more difficult: I could only guess. I decided not to.

"Listen", I said, "I'll cut the rope from your hands first and then the buckle of this belt. When I tell you to run, just run as fast as you can, okay?"

She nodded, unable to say anything. I took out the knife and cut the rope that was keeping her tied to the metal bars. Then I sliced the buckle of the explosive belt she was wearing, taking it off her back. I knew there were less than ten seconds left.

"Run now!" I yelled at her and she started in a frenzy towards the top of the hill.

I threw the belt high up in the opposite direction and tried to jump away from that tower. By the time I took the second leap I heard

the belt blow off in the air, a rain of flames and burning sparks above me, like fireworks coloring the snow.

I don't know what happened next.

Chapter 3

Coming Out to Light

I survived that night. I woke up many days later, but I was confined to intensive care and my recovery lasted for more than one month.

I lost track of Seloren. We were separated. As soon as I felt better, I asked around, but I couldn't find her. Even after the war was over, I didn't have any clue how or where to trace her in the world. The last image I had seen was her running uphill in the snow.

Now do an exercise of imagination: make it one year of absence. Let the clock move ahead, spin it fast forward. Actually, make it five years. Year after year after year... Seven years. Eight. No: you know what? Ten years. In fact, let's be honest: twenty years. How about twenty five? Well, imagine adding this amount of silence: twenty five years passing by without us ever meeting again. I guess years could have reached a hundred, and it still would have been the same situation, had I not kept looking for her, making that step ahead, without ever giving up action ... having a reason and the audacity to

surpass the walls, the silence, the emptiness. Through the years, that wasn't enough. It was more than that. I would say we were meant to see each other again.

During the first year without her it was infernally difficult to let her go from my mind. I was mostly torn between anger and regret, not knowing what to do, where to find her. Eventually, I decided to stop thinking about her, since it was pointless and hopeless. I had no idea where she was, who she was with, how that person might have been better for her instead of me. I was sure she had most certainly found someone else and gotten married after the war. I kept remembering her words "just an episode" and I also thought she could have looked for me, had she wanted to.

So I decided to forget her. I decided to free her from my thoughts, in the same way I had cut the explosive wire the last time we had been together. I thought it would be possible. After all, we had spent only a few weeks together. I thought it would be easy to get her out of my soul.

It wasn't.

I managed to convince myself I was over that love experience. I rationalized it. Anytime it would surface in my mind, I tried to erase it, send it back into oblivion, motivate myself beyond it, telling myself I was better off not thinking about it, to just keep going on with my life. And yet some girls I met later reminded me of her. Subconsciously, instinctively, I was probably attracted to something similar to what I had shared with Seloren. I didn't plan it, but it happened. Sometimes, I could not avoid it in any way. It was like ripples on the surface of a

lake, the circles were still reverberating; the influence of our coming together was still touching me in some ways, long after we had drifted apart.

I don't know why our encounter had been so powerful: was it the war, or the absolute freedom of love in the middle of battle? Was it the way we matched each other's energy in such a magnetic irresistible way? Had the universe designed us for each other from the beginning, before we were even born into existence or thrown in that war? Did we bring a lesson to each other, about ourselves? It was a total enigma. I'd always seen her as a gift in my life, a miraculous wonder of love. I could understand why she was still shining in my mind, whenever I remembered her name.

Years went by and there were still nights when I would dream about her, appearing right in front of me, with those bright eyes and the light of her smile making reality seem another realm. The comforting dreams ended by morning and I had to learn to live in a reality where she was absent. In twenty five years I was convinced she had encountered a man who could make her happy and she had forgotten the "episode" with me. I was also sure I deserved to find love with someone else, since she wasn't anywhere anyhow.

However, I was never able to forget: I understood her importance to me was timeless. She was in my system, at the dawn and the definition of who I became. She had been there and she would always mean an invincible love that surpassed the war. A love that went from undercover to light and stood by in the worst of times. A love that had confronted and defied danger, uncertainty, anxiety, chaos, darkness,

erasing them with just its presence. A love that had that taming, absolute and effortless power, that gift of serenity inherent. She would always be that light in my mind. She had become a myth of the past, an unattainable, irreplaceable dream. She had been there, in the beginning of my journey through life, at the deciding moment of who I would be, and nothing could ever take it away. The truth of her love, as brief as it had been, had expanded in significance and stayed undeleted, invincible through twenty five years.

I traveled a lot and saw many places and many people. My life was in continuous motion. Whenever I thought about her, I wondered if she might have something to say to me, or if I had become totally insignificant to her. I was still eager to find her, but I also doubted that she wanted to have anything to do with me in the present. Maybe she wanted to forget the war, the chaos, the love that had happened in such a short time. I had no idea what she could feel, so I focused on the people who were actually present in my life.

Yet it seemed unfair the way our lives had taken separate directions and I wished for some kind of a sign, a word, anything. I would have given anything to just be able to say “hello” to her once again. I wanted to apologize for not being wise enough when I was younger. I wanted to tell her who I had become. I kept searching online, but she was nowhere in the virtual internet. There was no trace of her: it was as if she was hiding. I wondered if I would ever see her again.

And then one day, I saw her.

She was at a conference, speaking about some new science

discoveries. I saw her in an interview on television. I immediately recognized her, even if she was slightly changed in appearance: she was wearing glasses and had cut her hair shorter. However, her eyes and smile had remained the same. Her calm and detached attitude, her reflective thoughts that moved like shades in her eyes when she was glancing sideways, everything was well known to me. I was instantly euphoric and fascinated to see her after so many years, to know what she was doing. It was unbelievably miraculous. I searched for the address of the lab that had organized the conference and decided to send her a message, written in a book – and then see if she wanted to respond in any way. I hoped she would feel safe enough and tempted to reach out to me. I hoped I could create that invitation that would get her out of the shell of silence, distance and time. I wondered if she would recognize me, if she could appreciate the person I'd become. And I waited. Days went by with no sign. Many questions were on my mind. Doubt had started to settle in my thoughts: maybe she didn't want to talk to me again.

And then one evening, out of the blue, the words appeared on the screen of my mobile phone:

“I do want to reach out to you”.

I knew it was her. She had answered my message.

“Here I am”, I texted immediately, in a second.

She paused for a moment. Then her words appeared on my screen:

“What took us so long??”

I smiled. Happiness overwhelmed me. I wanted to answer

something, but I couldn't explain to her the long years, the doubts and the silence. I just typed:

"I always searched for you."

"I didn't know."

"I thought you'd never answer. Ever again."

"I thought you'd never write."

Her reply made me smile once more. She was incredible with her answers, as she had been when we fell in love.

She continued:

"I almost fainted when I saw your handwriting again. "

"I promised I'd give you a book."

"Yes, you did. And I believed you."

"You believed in me. Thank you."

"I knew, somehow."

It was amazing how easily we slipped into talking to each other, as if the years had dissipated into mere dust and we had been together just a day before, up in the mountains, staring at each other, inseparably and equally overwhelmed by that magnetic, mesmerizing feeling.

"I missed you in my life", she wrote again the words and I was at once exhilarated and liberated by that miracle that she still felt the same for me.

It was as if a veil of silent emptiness, heavy with twenty five years had been lifted from my mind and my soul, freeing me instantly: it was an incredible relief to understand the truth, that she had actually missed me. I felt I was flying above the entire world. It was

safe enough to be sincere.

"I missed you so much", I wrote.

"Here we are now."

"I've been waiting for this moment for decades."

"Let's not waste anymore of those... decades, I mean."

Everything she said was right and it made me smile continuously, as I was staring at the phone. I recognized her completely beyond the words that appeared on the screen, as if she was standing right in front of me, with that enticing smile, with that light in her eyes, with that confirmation that made me feel redeemed and loved beyond any doubt.

"This must be something special, if we're unforgettable to each other", I typed.

Her reply was again unmistakably certain:

"That's not debatable. I remember everything. The nights under the blankets and up on the roof... the story you wrote in the snow... you reciting poems..."

"It's like a dream."

"Yes, emotions are overwhelming..."

And then she added, unexpectedly and somehow eagerly:

"Would it be possible to imagine we could see each other again?"

I had no hesitation about it:

"Absolutely."

"I would really like to go away with you", she typed.

"I want that too", I answered.

"When can you?"

"Anytime. How about April?"

We were in March. I thought we would have enough time to plan everything.

She agreed.

"Good. We'll do that. My favorite place is an ancient romantic city. Where would you like to go?"

"I like the islands, but it doesn't matter."

"Islands are hard to get away from."

"That's the idea", I smiled.

We didn't make any precise plans that evening. I was ready to go anywhere with her, as long as we would be together. I realized we never had any opportunity to spend time away from the war, to just enjoy each other, free and happy, as we had dreamt long ago. However, we had been free and happy even then, despite the battles around us: it had been our miracle - an undercover love that defied circumstances and enhanced the meaning of life.

"I was dying to read your letter, when I got the envelope", Seloren typed again.

"I wanted to remind you of the days when we were happy together."

"We were happy", she admitted.

And we felt so happy that evening too, typing on our phones for hours, after twenty five years, as if they had gone in a blink of an eye. Finding each other was completely shifting the borders of reality again: everything I had thought about her and about us during the long years had to be redefined into a happier version... into a better

truth. The universe was miraculous again and life had suddenly much more meaning.

"I think I'll go to sleep now." she told me later that night.

"Okay, good night. I'll be here if you need me", I replied.

"Good night."

I stared at the phone, almost not believing what a wonderful thing had just happened to us: finding each other in that way, as if time didn't really exist.

I told myself I would never let her go again. She would never be lost from me, ever.

And yet, I didn't anticipate the outside events that were rolling in the dark.

Something happened just a few days after we found each other on our phones.

A malfunction from a nuclear plant generated radioactive smoke and clouds that turned into rain. It spread radioactive particles from one country to another, to the entire globe. It spread out until it covered most continents.

At first, I thought we would simply postpone our plans of meeting each other, but then the situation got out of control. Seloren was off the phone most of the time and I couldn't get any information about her, or from her. As a lab scientist, she was requested to work day and night to find a solution for the people who had been affected by the radioactive burns.

I could only get brief messages from her, informing me that she was tired and had a hard time. I couldn't intervene, couldn't help and

would not be allowed to get near her anyway. I imagined she had been asked to help at the site of the nuclear plant and I wondered if she was one of those researchers wrapped up in isolation suits, working with dangerous chemicals. The radiation seemed extremely risen beyond safety levels and I waited day by day to hear that Seloren was okay.

I couldn't believe we had just found each other after twenty five years, only to face another separation again. It suddenly seemed so unfair. I was determined I wouldn't let it take her away from me, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

I wondered if the universe had brought us together again just to confirm that our love had been true. I wondered if that new wave of chemical poisoning, radioactive wind and whatever else was going on turned out to be just another way of keeping us apart.

In a few days, Seloren stopped responding to my texts and I was left wondering what was actually happening. I hoped she was just busy. I hoped she would tell me she was fine.

"I can't lose you again", I typed a message to Seloren.

"It's just been a rough week, I'm working 13 hours a day. I didn't sleep much", she replied and I understood I had to let her be.

"I hope you stay safe".

She answered:

"You too."

And that was it: silence again. I couldn't say anything more. I didn't dare add to her worries and anxiety. I had no idea what her life was like at that moment. I only remembered how she had fallen

asleep in my arms, long ago, and I wished I could comfort her again just by being there for her. And yet, that was no longer possible, with the radiation keeping her away from me. Ironically, we had found each other only to be kept apart.

At least we exchanged a few messages, I thought to myself. It was more than I would have dreamed to become possible during the long years of our silent absence from each other's lives. Yet knowing I could suddenly contact her but it would not solve anything was a thought that kept bothering me like an undercurrent of subconscious rebellion.

In the meantime, because of my military training and experience in the past, I was called to join an army team that would wipe the streets with a particular foam that could neutralize the chemicals. The town seemed deserted, as if everybody had gone to a shelter against radiation. We were wearing masks and suits that could reduce radiation and chemicals, riding on the side of firefighting trucks and spraying the sidewalks, the buildings, the asphalt, everything in sight.

At night, we roamed the parks, to spray the grass and the trees. As I was looking at the moon and the stars, listening to the hidden birds, watching the shadows of tree branches I wondered how deep the level of radiation could be, if nature was so peaceful and full of hope. There was something magical about spring time: trees full of flowers rising across the clear blue sky, the little night lamps in the grass that looked like blue stars scattered on the ground, the smell of earth, fresh plants, washed out dust and the bright swirling colors in daytime, everything was contradictory to the idea that the world stood

still, threatened by the dangerous chemicals and radioactive atmosphere. Nature was so miraculous: it kept flourishing, thriving, shining brighter. It was stronger than human mistakes. I wondered why humans were so careless about it, taking for granted everything that was valuable in their lives.

I wondered if Seloren and I had done the same thing: taking for granted what we had together, by not doing enough to find each other again.

I remembered her confession to me long ago, when we were in the mountains and I had returned from a walk in the snow: *"I wanted to say I love you, but it sounds better to say I need you"*, she had written on one of those notes for me. Those three words "I need you" had been such a treasure in my mind. I wished she could say them again, but there was only endless silence that I couldn't break anymore. I missed her deeply. I remembered the closeness we had shared and wished I could look in her eyes, but I didn't know if that would ever be a reality again.

One day, I finally got an answer to my text. I couldn't stay away anymore, I had to contact her.

"I couldn't forget that year when we were together", I wrote to her.

"I want to remember more", she replied.

It seemed a positive answer, so I continued:

"Where are you?"

Instead of answering, she sent me a satellite map with her location.

I looked at the address. I decided to go there and find her.

"Can I come over?" I texted. "I miss your eyes."

"I don't look the same as years ago."

I already knew what she looked like. I had seen her on television. I still recognized her.

"What time is convenient for you? Would you like to meet me somewhere?" I asked.

"I can't get out of the house. I'm too sick for that", she confessed. "I've been isolated indoors for eight weeks already. This radiation altered my health and I'm not allowed to walk in the contaminated streets. But you can come over."

I felt worried about her: the sudden disclosure of her unstable health made me want to be there to comfort her. That situation explained her silence and reserved messages.

I jumped on the first plane to get there as soon as I could.

When I arrived, it was raining again. The streets were deserted and the peaceful water dripping on the roofs reminded me of the time when we were in the mountains, together, so unexpectedly yet irrevocably in love. I still felt the same way for her: she had a special place in my memory. She represented a love that had been so liberating, secretly sweet and deep, expanding and unfolding under the limitations of strict, conventional, oblivious circumstances. I could remember it as if only a few days had gone by.

I arrived there at the time when the evening was slowly spreading shadows of a dim light, filtered by the rain, over the empty town. My heart was beating faster by the minute, as I advanced on the

sidewalk. The moment I turned the corner I already saw her standing there, in front of the building. She had come to the entrance to greet me, in case I wouldn't know where to look. I saw her from afar, in the open door, staring along the empty street, with her arms folded around her, as if she felt cold. I wondered if she would recognize me. I had grown a mustache and wasn't wearing the army uniform anymore. I had a casual jacket, jeans, baseball cap and snickers. I could have been anyone, in that empty street.

I kept advancing towards her and then her eyes noticed me. I was the only one walking around at that hour. She probably guessed or recognized me at once. She made a gesture with her hand, waving hello through the rain.

I felt my breathing freeze in the humid air, as my heart was almost beating out of my chest. I stopped in front of her. We looked at each other and smiled. Her eyes were sparking with that deep light that I recognized. She seemed a bit tired, but the abyss of light in her stare was just the same and I got dizzy and lost in it once again, like long ago, hypnotized and fascinated. It didn't matter how we had changed in time: the thrill of the encounter was overwhelming.

“Hi Seloren”.

“Let's get inside, I can't be out too much”, she replied.

We went inside the hallway and got into the elevator. When we got out, we paused there in the half dark corridor, looking at each other. It had been a long time, but I could recognize everything about her. We locked glances for what seemed like minutes. I could sense something was shining in her stare. I could feel the sizzling attraction

between us, in the dark corridor, waiting. As we stood there, she leaned with her back against the wall and I felt drawn to take that step closer and kiss her. I didn't have any hesitation. It felt like long ago for a moment, her lips melting under mine, our desires getting to our heads. The mesmerizing energy of us together was once again in my life and I couldn't get enough of it.

But then, she looked away.

"I'm confused", she whispered and she turned to unlock the door. I sensed something was wrong. I followed her inside.

"Would you like something to drink?" she offered politely.

"Just tea. It's a bit cold outside."

"Tea it is then."

She brought me a steamy cup and we sat at the coffee table, looking at each other again, in lost contemplation. Something worried me about her. There was a distance that I couldn't understand, a foggy uncertainty in her gestures. I told myself twenty five years were indeed a long time.

"So how are you?" I asked her.

"It's been rough lately. The radiation is messing with my brain. I'm trying to keep cool, but it's not easy."

She sipped the tea from her cup, then looked at me through the steam.

"And you? "

"I'm fine. I'm doing great, actually. I've been a free man ever since the war ended. I feel so liberated and alive. I'm so happy to see you again!"

"It's been a long time."

"Yeah, but I still remember everything like it was yesterday."

She looked down. She wrapped the robe around her, as if trying to shield herself.

"This is a bit too intense for me. I don't remember very well what we were... what was. I have some sort of amnesia from the exposure to radioactive environment. Give me some time to figure things out."

I felt the earth sink beneath my feet, dragging me down with it, on a slope I hadn't expected. My enthusiasm had hit a wall. My mind was spinning. It seemed so unfair. I looked at her, wondering if she actually didn't feel the same for me anymore and was using the radiation as an excuse. I was sure there had been other men that had sparked her interest in such a long time, but I still felt I should have been the one who deserved to be with her, despite everything. It was hard to understand why she suddenly didn't remember anything anymore.

The evening was getting darker somehow, weighing on my shoulders.

"You don't remember us? I can't believe it!" I said. "You're the closest lover I ever had!"

My confession was unexpected to her. She looked down.

"I didn't know that. I guess I don't think of you as a lover now."

"You'll always be a lover in my memory. We were lovers and we were very much in love, you can't possibly deny that. You can't change the past, you can't take it away. You're lying to yourself."

She backed off a little, admitting:

"Maybe I lied to myself. I remember some things, but not as much as you. You seem to know more than I do about those days. Besides, you disappeared. I wondered for many years why you decided that."

"I didn't disappear! The bomb blew me away – that bomb that was tied to you! I was in recovery and looked for you afterwards, but couldn't find you anywhere."

Her words kept blowing my mind away. Everything she said was unexpected and it left me bewildered. I suddenly felt alone with the story of us long ago. I realized she had left me then in the snow, and she was leaving me again, by denying the past.

She glanced at me from behind the glasses, pleading:

"I hope you don't disappear again. I missed my extraordinary friend."

"We were more than friends", I replied, perplexed at the way she was turning things around, contrary to what she had said and done long ago, contrary to what I had known about us my entire life.

I couldn't wrap my mind around how she had forgotten about us and the depth of the feeling we had shared. She had seemed so enthusiastic in the beginning. I couldn't understand how exposure to radiation would erase her memories of us to such an extent.

I couldn't deal with it anymore. I knew the truth and it was so important to me, while she was trying to destroy it with a lie.

I stood up.

"Look, I don't want to be just friends with you. It's not right, what you're doing. Please don't do this."

"I understand you're upset. I would be too. I don't know if I'm ever going to remember us again. It might take months or even years to get out of this amnesia. The effects might be permanent."

I stared at her, unable to accept it. I felt the hit like a ton of bricks in my soul. There was only one thing left for me to do: turn around and go. Before leaving, I tried one more time to reach an understanding with her:

"Maybe you don't remember what we had then, but what about now? Do you think I qualify as someone you could fall in love again? "

She looked at me as if she was evaluating her feelings. Her glance had some distance in it. Eventually, she lowered her eyes.

"That's a difficult question."

"It isn't. It's either yes or no."

I breathed deeply. I already knew her answer, from her attitude.

"Give me time to figure it out", she said again.

"This means it's not a yes. When you think you can love me more than a friend, let me know."

I walked towards the door, and she followed me, hesitating. She paused in the doorway.

"Thanks for the tea", I said before getting out. "And thank you for the love that I experienced with you. I know what I lived then. I just wish it could have a different ending."

"You don't need to be so dramatic".

"I'm not dramatic, but this is hard for me."

She seemed resigned to accept my protest as justified.

"I probably don't deserve your love anyway. I'm just average."

“You were never average in my eyes.”

I stared at her in silence. I was sure I loved her just as I had in the mountains, but I knew I had to let her wake up from that unexplained amnesia, by herself.

I had been convinced we had both been missing out a lot from each other, from our lives. I had hoped we would come to our senses eventually and realize we could be happy together. Our love wouldn't need to stay undercover anymore. We could be free lovers this time.... free in daylight, without hiding, without any worries. And yet, she didn't see it my way. She didn't remember loving me.

Walking alone in the rain, after the night had covered the silent town, I wondered what I could say to remind Seloren of the past: what could bring back the memory of that love. I was sure we had magic between us. I knew we would have it forever, no matter what, and if she could overcome the amnesia, she would rediscover that we were really good together. I was certain we could love each other just the same – or even more, despite the twenty five years of absence.

However, her denial made me wonder if that girl in the mountains was no longer there, and the one I met that evening was another person. I wondered if the Seloren I knew had lost her trace in the snow, on that day when the bomb blew off. Doubt was challenging me. I didn't want to let her go, but I also had to let her make up her mind if she wanted me again. I sensed there still was a current of magnetic attraction underneath our interaction that evening, something that could resurface and revive itself, if we could just give in to it. I couldn't get it out of my mind how she let me kiss her by the

elevator. The way she kissed me had not been a lie. I knew the chemistry and emotional magnetic bond we used to have were overflowing under the surface of amnesia and time. We had to have that chance to overcome past limitations and recreate a better version of us together, liberated.

It crossed my mind the following days that I should take her away to a place where she could feel better: a clean safe environment where she would be at peace, to recover her health and focus her mind. I looked up tourist destinations: cabins in the mountains, waterfalls, forests, lakes... I found something that was just right. I booked tickets for a cabin in the mountains, near a lake and a waterfall. The view was breathtaking. The forest was green, pastures clean and high up the mountain top, the water falling into the lake was so pure one could see the pebbles at the bottom. There was a small wooden cabin right next to the lake and I booked it for two weeks. I decided we could extend the time if Seloren enjoyed it. I hoped the environment would be enough to start feeling better and finally be free from everything else. And free to remember.

I only needed her to say yes.

I called her and told her I was coming over. I owned a motorcycle, so I rode to her building, and stopped under her window. She heard the engine and looked down. I saw her face in the window, with the smoky dark glasses, as if hiding in the reflection.

“Come on! Let's go for a ride!” I shouted at her, as I kept the engine running.

She smiled. I thought she wouldn't accept, but in a few minutes

she was at the door. I wondered if she would feel cold in the thin blue jeans and raincoat.

She sat behind me, and her arms wrapped around my body, as I had dreamed for so many times in the past years. Her touch reminded me that everything was right as long as we were together.

I started the motorcycle and went slowly at first. She leaned her head on my back. I could feel her temple on my shoulder, as I was riding along the empty streets. We went on and on, I didn't want to stop. The speed increased and I could only feel her arms around me, a tight grip that wouldn't let go. We had to be together again, I thought. We belonged together. I felt it so deep, right to my bones.

The rain had stopped and there was some sunlight coming through the clouds, shining on the wet leaves and grass. The sky was clearing up, and as we got to the park it was almost light blue everywhere, with soft fluffy white dissipating.

I didn't want to end our ride, as I didn't want her to take her arms off me. It felt like the most reassuring moment since I had found her again. I didn't want to let her go: however, I was ready to give her the freedom to feel, think and consider how much she wanted me in her life.

I stopped the engine by the gates of the big park. We jumped off the bike and she looked around, with a refreshed smile.

"Thank you for taking me out. I've been locked inside for weeks..."

She inhaled the clean air, smelling of trees. As I watched her walk beside me, I remembered how much I enjoyed her presence.

"I missed seeing you move around", I said.

"I don't move around that much anymore... I'm rather lazy", she answered.

"It's not about the speed. It's about you being you."

"Whatever that means."

"I enjoy your presence, as I used to."

"I might be disappointing now in many ways" she replied.

I was a bit bewildered that she was turning around and diminishing everything I was saying about me appreciating her. I thought she needed time to get used to me again. I wondered if she would ever find me attractive, as the man I had become through the years.

"It's been a long time since we were around each other", I admitted.

"Twenty five years"

"Right."

We advanced along the alleys.

"You once said you hoped you wouldn't disappoint me so much that I would end up hating you", I reminded her.

"Apparently, I said many things that seemed deep, but I was too young then. I was just trying to figure out many things. I was just an average girl."

"What you said was special to me."

"Because you loved me."

"Yes, I loved you. But what you said was special because you were so, so, sooo... unlike any others I knew. I loved you because of

that. I still love that girl, I wish she didn't get lost in the mountains, in my story".

I knew she would remember the story I wrote in the forest.

"Funny", she replied, but I didn't think so.

I found it a bit sad that she didn't remember.

She remained silent.

She just walked along by my side for a while. Then she said simply:

"You remember moments, words, everything. I only remember it was intense, but not the details. I remember kissing you, but not many other memories."

I smiled.

"At least you remember the kisses. That means it was good enough to remember."

I took her hand, touching her fingers slightly. I had longed for so many years to touch her again. Her pale, thin fingers were warm and cold at the same time, interlaced with mine. I got suddenly enthusiastic:

"Let's get away, travel together. I'd go anywhere with you. I've got tickets for a cabin in the mountains, by a waterfall and a lake, it's very beautiful. Let's go there tomorrow and be free. You can take time off to heal and feel better... and remember how good it was together. Let's go there and get to know each other again, like you said long ago... "

"Are you always so serious, or just now with me?"

"I'm serious. You just forgot it... "

She didn't answer. My heart cringed at the thought that she was too tired, too hurt by whatever past she had experienced in my absence, too sick from the radiation, too resigned and used to a life without the certainty of love to ever say yes to my plan.

I was aware it was possible she wouldn't see the point, that she couldn't remember her feelings for me. I wondered if she could see any value in us anymore. I didn't want to believe the girl she used to be was completely lost in the past. I had felt her presence in our recent conversations. She had to still be there... something from her was still the same, the way she responded to me, the way she walked by my side.

I confronted her about it:

"If there's not much left of that girl inside you now, what have you been doing here with me? Is it so different now between us?"

"I have no memories of us anymore and I'm really sorry for that", she replied. "Who I am right now is a result of everything that's been going on in my head for the past years and I am not sorry because this is who I am."

She sounded defensive.

I was ready to accept that we both were different people than we had been twenty five years ago. I also understood she might never recover her memory of us - she might never get out of the amnesia. I had to deal with that and start again. I wanted to believe we had found each other for a good reason: we still had something that was right between us.

"We are who we are now. What we are doing here together is

what I want to know” I said and she spoke immediately, as if she had already thought about it before:

“I have absolutely no idea. Reconnecting with you is fabulous. This is all I know. However, I feel some tension and it scares me, but otherwise it's still great talking to you.”

“What tension? From me?”

“Yes, obviously. You want to know things. I don't know how to answer.”

Suddenly, uncertainty infused the atmosphere through the pale light of the afternoon, over the wet park. I realized the person that was walking with me might have become very different from the girl I once knew. She didn't recognize herself anymore and maybe I had to reconsider who she was too. I had to give her time to decide if she wanted to go on a trip with me – and see where that would take us. I wasn't on a mission to convince her of anything. I wanted everything to flow naturally between us. It didn't matter if she would never remember the past, ever again. If we had something good together in the present, that would be a new beginning... for what exactly, I didn't know either. There was something mesmerizing in the way she kept saying “You”, “I”. It matched the way I said “together”. We were effortlessly matching each other somehow, beyond time, beyond her amnesia or my memories, we were synchronized again without even realizing it.

I knew I didn't want to let her go and I was sure she felt the same.

“Don't answer right now”, I told her. “Think about it until

tomorrow and then give me a call when you decide. I'll be ready with the tickets and I'll come pick you up, if you say yes. I'm not asking you to do anything but come along on a journey... go away with me."

I was sure it would help her feel better, getting away from everything for once, with someone who loved her – who could really love her indeed, without a doubt.

"Look how beautiful the sky is. The sun is setting..."

We looked at the colors mixing with some dark clouds in the horizon, the light emerging from behind the line of gray. It was peaceful, yet it wasn't promising in any way.

"Take me home", Seloren said turning to me in a shiver of cold.

She seemed fragile and reserved. I wanted to hold her and keep her warm, but I just took her back to her apartment. She got off the bike, wrapping the raincoat around her thin body. I stared at her frail image, wishing I could protect and love her until she would believe in happiness again. I remained on my bike, as she was stepping on the sidewalk.

"I'll call you tomorrow", she said, shivering under the coat.

I looked at the line of her lips, the bright watery eyes lost in deep thoughts, the refined features of her face and I almost jumped from the bike to take her in my arms, but I didn't. Instead, I said simply:

"I'll be there when you call."

I watched her vanish inside the building.

I started the engine and turned around, riding along the streets that were getting dark.

I hoped for the best answer from her: it had to be yes. I wanted

to remain neutral, to avoid worrying or thinking negative thoughts. I wanted to believe in us. I wanted to believe that a true love like that was possible even after twenty five years, thirty, fifty or a hundred... it was still valuable and strong enough to make us happy even after an eternity of absence. I wanted so much to believe it. A love like that would never ever disappear, would never fade away, despite the circumstances or the denial, despite the long time, the unexpected amnesia or distance... no matter what happened, it couldn't be taken away from us... it had been so deeply undercover, but it was coming to light. I wanted to believe in it beyond everything.

And yet, I wasn't very sure either of what could be again between us. Even if she said yes, I still had to get to know her once more as the person she had become, just as she had to understand who I was in the present. There were no guarantees for us that we would be right for each other again. There was only my belief that we could.

I didn't make any other plans except for us to go away together.

I understood we had a blank page ahead of us. Neither of us could say what we were going to write on it, in the future. I just knew I wanted a future with her somehow - anyhow. If we were going to fall madly in love again, that remained to be discovered. If we were going to find ourselves as inseparable as we had been, we had yet to let it unfold by itself. If we were going to drift apart again, that was also an option. I almost got ready and willing to accept I could let her go if she didn't want me anymore. I was aware it would be a possibility, to go in different directions in our lives.

However, I wished for a positive answer.

I would only have to wait for her call.

I've been writing this story while I was waiting for it.

Maybe I'll let her read this stuff and hopefully it will trigger some of her memories of us... or just keep it as a reminder, instead of her lost memories.

I can remember our story for both of us. If she reads it, maybe it will come back to her mind.

I don't have much hope that it will get her out of the unexpected amnesia, but it almost doesn't matter now. It's possible that our amazing, deep and beautiful love will come out of the undercover oblivion anyway, to shine freely after so many years of absence, just like the day we walked in the forest together and we saw sunlight appear from behind clouds, clearing up the sky, making us believe in a new beginning.

It won't be a surprise whatever she answers, because no matter what it is, I will still love her forever and ever. She has given me so much during that time we spent in the mountains. She made me believe in the power of love. She loved me in a way I had only dreamed before. Maybe now it's time for me to help her believe in love and happiness again. I have the right to ask her to consider going away with me. And I'm glad I could ask that question. I enjoyed asking. It's mine to ask. It doesn't matter if she says yes or no, because she already said yes in the past, once. Now she only needs to remember how it feels to say yes to me again.

We are free to decide every moment to be happy and to love - under any circumstance, under any sky, with every heartbeat we

have, with every breath that we are alive. If we were lovers then, we can be again. This love we had was never wrong. It was hidden, unexplained, invincible, irresistible, amazingly deep and true, under the restrictions of a war that took us apart eventually. However, if we drifted back together again, that means it wasn't a lie. This love was as real as it gets. It still is. I believe it is. I tell myself we deserve to have it come out into the light now.

I've been waiting for her call all day. It's almost evening.

I think the phone might be ringing now. I hear something.

I hope she'll say yes.

I'll come back to finish the ending of this story, but first I must answer the phone.

Wait a second.

PART II
LOVERS UNDERWATER

Chapter 1
A Dream of Water

The phone rang.

But when I answered, there was just an odd silence on the line. At first, I thought it was her. I thought she hadn't made up her mind yet and was hesitating, unsure what to say.

I was far from the truth: it wasn't her. The phone went off.

And then it rang again.

"Hello there!" I said.

"You leave Seloren alone!"

It was a man's voice, heavy and coarse, hidden in something that sounded like traffic noise.

"What?"

"You do as I said!"

"Who the hell are you?"

"You stay away from her!"

The phone went off again. I just stared at the screen, clueless. The number had been hidden as an anonymous call.

I had been waiting for her the entire day to tell me if she wanted to get away on a vacation and possibly retrieve some of her lost memories of us two, before the radiation had scattered them into foggy oblivion. I had hoped she would decide to say yes and come with me on a trip. I would have thought her lost memory was the only obstacle standing between us.

I had no idea there were people on a mission to keep us apart.

Who could have been? I paced back and forth across the room. An ex-boyfriend maybe? The voice had sounded too demanding, professional, official, cold and precise, delivering an order from a hidden authority. It didn't bear any passionate inflections. It had been calculated and almost obliterating any imaginary protest from the start, as if there was no option whatsoever.

There was only one question on my mind: **Why?**

I dialed her number, but there was no answer, so I grabbed my jacket and rushed out the door.

I knew I had to get to her, just to make sure she was okay. Somehow, that warning phone call had made me worry for her. Something wasn't right. I had promised myself I wouldn't reach out to her until she was ready to give me an answer, but I couldn't keep my distance when things were turning shady and unsettling.

I jumped on the motorbike and started the engine. It was already evening and the light was fading out into dark blue across the sky. The streetlights spread along the roads, shiny little stars lighting the way as I increased my speed, swinging past cars from left to right. At some point, I noticed in the rear view mirror the blinding headlights of a

Jeep, keeping track of my bike as I was changing lanes. I left the downtown avenues, turning on smaller darker streets to get to Seloren's place. The Jeep paused around a corner, turning off its headlights. I was sure someone would still watch me in the dark. I didn't care if it was the man on the phone. I was more concerned about her.

I stopped in front of her building. The lights were off. Her windows were closed and dark. Nothing moved.

And then, suddenly, my phone rang. I took it out of my pocket: it was her. Seeing her name on the screen was an unexpected relief.

"Hi! Are you okay?" I said in one breath.

"Yeah."

Her voice was hesitant and I could hardly distinguish the words. There was intense noise around her. It was an engine. A big one.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Ky... I can't go with you on that trip."

"Why not? Are you saying you don't want to - or can't?"

"I want to. But I can't... not right now, anyway."

I listened to the noise that almost covered her words and I suddenly understood she was leaving.

"Is that a plane? Are you at the airport?"

"Yes. I must go now."

I didn't even blink.

"Wait for me! I'm coming with you!"

"You can't do that again, Ky. We're not teenagers anymore. You can't just drop everything and jump on a plane with me."

“Watch me.”

She started to say something, but I didn't have time. I jumped on the bike and flashed by the Jeep, so it couldn't keep up with me anymore.

I arrived at the airport so enthusiastic for the sudden idea of accompanying her, even if I knew it meant I would have to adjust to many unpredictable situations ahead. It felt right, nevertheless. I knew I had to do it: I had to make sure she was going to be safe.

Seloren was standing by the check-in desk when I got there. She had a small travel bag and was glancing around absently, through her sunglasses. When her eyes met mine she smiled, slightly resigned to witness the irrevocable truth of my presence. She seemed lost and fragile in that crowded noisy place.

“I'm just in time to buy a last minute ticket”, I said and she shook her head.

“You're nuts...”

“Do you remember when I jumped into the truck for you?”

“I'll never forget it... among other things. ”

Her smile seemed to intensify, but the next second her eyes turned away, towards the big hall full of people. I wondered if she remembered how she had felt about me, long ago... how we had defied war and danger, finding miraculous love undercover. However, I knew both of us had become different from our encounter years ago. And yet... was there anything left from what we had shared together? I looked at her, as if trying to guess what she was thinking... as if trying to see if time had irreversibly distanced us from each other. I could

only see her eyelashes behind the sunglasses.

“What's with the shades?”

She shrugged, a bit tired.

“The light hurts my eyes, ever since that radiation. The neon in this room is too bright.”

“Maybe you'll feel better in time.”

“I don't know... I don't feel very well. I feel as if nothing is the same about me anymore... “

“So what are you doing, getting on a plane?”

“I have to go, I was asked to be somewhere. It's work related. I've got to find the source of that radiation leak, so I'm meeting some people in a lab. It's an international science meeting.”

I wondered if I could tell her about the phone call and the Jeep, but then I decided against it.

She already had enough on her mind.

We boarded the plane. As I had bought my ticket without a reservation, my seat was a few numbers away from hers. It was different from the past, when we were going up the mountains in a truck, in the middle of nowhere, but something reminded me of the absolute certainty we had felt. We had been more certain of our love than anything in the world... and yet, we had drifted far away from that moment... away from each other, somehow. She didn't even remember how she had fallen in love with me. And maybe she didn't even attempt to. It seemed to me she had already given up on us somehow.

But there I was, on the same plane with her. It had to be a good

start.

I watched the fluffy clouds: we were flying above a sea of white cotton candy. It looked like an empire of snow, a castle in the sky. It seemed promising and I felt optimistic. I also felt sleepy. Seloren was reading some files, probably scientific data. I watched her fingers turn the pages and somehow I dozed off.

Suddenly, I was in a swimming pool area and the lights were out. There was someone in the water. The silhouette moved, and the water moved with her. The lights at the bottom of the swimming pool made her body glow. It was her. I was standing by in a bathrobe, just watching. She climbed the marble steps slowly and her body emerged from the water, her skin wet and her hair damp, dripping warmth. I noticed she wasn't wearing a bathing suit. She was actually stark naked. I couldn't take my eyes off her, as she advanced towards me. I was stunned, as I'd never seen her like that before: completely exposed and unflinching, totally aware of it, intentionally, irresistibly right in front of me. She didn't hesitate; she kept advancing until she stood so close that I could feel her breathing in my ear. I knew what she intended when her hands took the bathrobe off my shoulders, in a swift move. *Let's get back into the water*, she whispered. Her body kept glowing in the neon lights, beautifully hypnotizing through the vapors that enveloped the pool area like a mist. She looked vulnerable and determined at the same time as her arms went around my neck, and we were taking the steps together, sliding in the warm liquid. I felt a wave of heating emotion rise in my chest, as the water touched my skin.

"We have to get off", I heard her voice loud and clear so I opened my eyes, startled.

I looked around perplexed: I was on the plane and Seloren was staring at me from behind her sunglasses, with the briefcase under her arm, leaning on the edge of my seat.

"You look confused... The plane has landed. We must get off."

"Oh, right... Damn, it happened at the wrong moment."

I yawned, still feeling the warm touch of her arms on my skin and the water surrounding me, as if the dream had been real. She watched me attentively and curiously.

"Why? What were you dreaming?"

I grinned.

"Something... nothing..."

"Yeah, something interesting for sure. Come on, tell me."

I looked at her, evaluating if she could handle it.

"Umm... I don't think we have time now."

"Well, if you want to be mysterious, I won't insist. You can tell me when we get to the hotel."

"Great. I'm looking forward to it."

I smiled. She pointed to my jacket.

"Don't forget your luggage. By the way, I wonder... won't you need pajamas tonight?"

I shrugged.

"Sometimes, I don't need any."

She smiled.

"You never cease to surprise me."

"You don't know half of it yet."

It had been a long time since we had shared more intimate moments and I didn't see it happening anytime soon, so when we arrived at the hotel I let her choose a room for herself and I chose another single room for myself. I didn't even mention we could have stayed together. I didn't know if she could be comfortable taking that step and I wanted to give her space to understand how she felt about me - if she could ever discover that feeling again... or even a more liberating one... an unforgettable, undeniable one, forever.

"So, what's the schedule?" I asked her.

"For you, not much of a schedule, I'm afraid. You'll have to stay out of that lab where I'm going tomorrow morning. And I don't know how long I'll be there."

"Okay, don't worry about me. I'll walk around the city. I'll tell you later if I discover anything interesting."

She stopped in front of her room and turned to look at me. I could almost see her smile.

"Don't forget about that dream you promised to tell me."

Then she added:

"I'm tired now. See you tomorrow. Good night."

And she went inside.

*

I woke up in the darkness as the phone rang again.

For a moment, I thought I was back home, but then I saw the shadows of the hotel room furniture. The screen kept illuminating the night table. I looked at it: anonymous call, hidden number. I wanted to go back to sleep, but I also wondered if it was the same person. I answered:

“What do you want?”

“I told you to stay away from her!”

It was the same voice.

“Who gave you my number?”

“ You didn't listen. I'm warning you, for the last time!”

“Is this a joke?”

The man coughed roughly.

“Does it look like that to you? We know you're in the hotel with her. We know you were on the plane with her. We're watching your every move. And you're not doing what we told you to do.”

I looked around.

“So, you've got surveillance cameras in here?”

“We've got them everywhere.”

“Who the hell are you anyway?”

“We know you were in the army. We know everything about you. Just stay away from her, or you'll regret it! Tomorrow morning you'll get back on the plane and go home.”

“You wish!”

I hung up and switched off the phone. I didn't care if they had cameras. I didn't care if they were listening to my phone. I cared about Seloren and nobody could intimidate me to remove myself from

her life, just because “they” were watching us.

However, the threats seemed real. I didn't know what “they” were planning, but I was sure they wanted to separate me from Seloren, in order to isolate her, for some reason. It had to do with the radiation and the scientific investigation. I knew I had to stick around to find out what it was.

The first thing I did the next morning was go to Seloren's room.

When she answered the door she was already prepared to go out. She was wearing an office suit, high collar shirt and her hair was up in a ponytail. The metal frame narrow glasses and the briefcase gave her a professional, very scientific appearance. I took a step back, to let her pass by.

“I see you're ready to go to the meeting. You look sharp, teeth and nails...”

“Oh, it's just an impression. I'm trying to keep my cool because I'm nervous about the meeting and I'm terrified of making mistakes with that investigation.”

“I'm sure you'll do just fine. Let me come along. Have you had breakfast yet?”

She glanced at me. I could see the uncertainty in her eyes.

“I'm not sure I can eat anything before the meeting. I'm really nervous. There'll be scientists from all over the world and I'm supposed to tell them what I discovered, and convince them of it too.”

“You can tell me about it first, just to practice. Here, let's have some coffee.”

She sighed, letting some tension dissolve away from her back as

she stretched out her arms and relaxed.

"Alright. One coffee."

I went ahead and she came along with me to the hotel dining room. It seemed so easy sometimes to just be with her, as she didn't protest too much to my ideas. Instead, she welcomed whatever I said as a possibility. She agreed instinctively and she made it seem like the best thing she wanted at the moment. I almost remembered how right it felt long ago, when we were in tune with each other, in harmony each second, as if our energies naturally matched and uplifted each other along the way. I hoped she could feel it too. Yet I knew she would be too worried about the present to remember the past.

I took the coffee cups to the outside terrace. The air was cold, but the pale sunlight made it better. Looking out from the terrace, the new morning light seemed invigorating.

"So, what have you discovered?" I smiled, initiating conversation.

"It's about the radioactive rain. I don't know if I should tell you."

"Why not? After the conference, people are going to find out sooner or later anyway."

She looked down into the black coffee. She seemed absent and distant. Her silence was a sign of hesitation. I already knew that.

I offered to help:

"You'll have to begin your speech somehow. You can start by addressing the issue. Where does radiation come from?"

"There are some theories saying it comes from the sun. A few scientists believe it's from solar explosions infiltrating the atmosphere, breaching through the layers and accumulating in the raindrops."

"And you don't think it's plausible?"

She sipped some coffee, looking over the cup, into a distant dimension.

"I think it might be true, at some point in the planet's history, but not in this case. I see it differently and I've got proof of it. The radiation comes from inside, not from outside the atmosphere. There's a source on the ground level. It was toxic and it was there in the soil before it got into the rain."

"How do you know?"

She looked at me, still calm and detached.

"I analyzed the data from two months prior to the rain. It had been there, but nobody saw it before the storm started. I've got it all written here, in my files."

I looked at the briefcase she had been carrying around.

"Is this information available somewhere else too?"

"Yes. It was on my laptop, which I left at home because the system crashed. It must have been a computer virus or something. It happened right before I left."

"And now it's only in your printed files."

"I managed to save the information on a USB flash drive that I prepared for the conference."

I suddenly saw the reason for the phone calls.

"Do you think someone would be interested to hide this information?"

"I don't know. Why would they do that?"

I thought about it.

“What if they're responsible for it? They wouldn't want it to be known.”

“How could someone be responsible for so much radiation? It would have to be an entire atomic factory.”

“Yes, exactly: what if it's a top secret building somewhere in the desert, making experiments or preparing weapons? What if it malfunctioned? Or even worse, what if it was on purpose?”

She glanced at me in disbelief.

“Your imagination is wild. I find it hard to believe there could be some illegal experimental activity going on, with so much impact and no one to be accountable for it.”

“But what if there is?”

She shrugged, somehow disinterested.

“I don't think I can find out who's doing it or where it comes from. I only need to discover how to reverse radiation effects. That's my task, actually. And until I do that, I'm not sure I can feel better.”

She finished the coffee and stood up.

“I'm going to the conference.”

Suddenly, she stopped, opened the briefcase, searched her suit pockets and started to look around, worried.

“What?” I asked, noticing she was distracted and anxious.

“My phone. I can't find it. Have you seen my phone, Ky?”

“I haven't, not this morning anyway. Maybe you left it in the room?”

We went together. After a few minutes, there was still no result and she was still worried.

"It's not there. It's not anywhere. I had it with me yesterday. I must have lost it somewhere... on the plane, in the airport... I don't know. My whole contact list is on it."

I found it suspicious that her phone had disappeared. I looked at my watch.

"What time is the conference starting?"

"Ten. But I should be there by nine thirty, to get the files in their computer for the video projector. I asked the hotel staff to call a taxi for me."

I followed her outside. There was a taxi waiting by the sidewalk.

She turned to me and said simply:

"I'll see you later."

"I want to come with you."

"You can't be there. Only diplomatic delegates and certified scientists can participate."

"Tell them I'm your assistant."

"My assistant is a girl."

"They don't know that. Tell them a male assistant was sent with you this time: me."

She shook her head, accepting somehow reluctantly.

"Fine. But it won't be enough just to tell them. You need some documents to prove it."

While we were talking, we got inside the taxi. The driver started the car.

From the first moment it seemed unusual to me that he didn't even ask for a destination. I wondered if the car had been sent to pick

Seloren up and take her directly to the conference.

I didn't have time to think about it. The taxi stopped on a small street and two masked, armed men got in. What followed was someone placed a bag on my head.

"Not one word, or you'll get a bullet as a reply."

We weren't given any explanation and we didn't have any choice.

When I could finally look around I was in the backseat of the Taxi, inside a garage, hands tied up behind my back. Seloren was tied up too, in the front seat. The engine was running and there was a slight smell of gasoline. I felt a little dizziness and nausea building up, so I suspected carbon monoxide poisoning was about to happen. She stood still and silent, so I had to check her situation.

"Seloren, are you awake?"

"I am... for now."

She seemed too shocked to say more.

I had to think quickly, before the fog that blurred my vision would increase the confusion in my head.

"Listen, they left us here to asphyxiate. We have to get out. Can you climb over the seat? Get over here. I have an army knife in my jacket."

She moved and rolled over the seat. We were crammed together in the back of the taxi, trying to adjust to a position where her hands would get my pocket knife.

"Do you even think this is possible?" she asked, while twisting her tied wrists to get to my jacket, struggling with the zipper.

"I'm sure it is. You can do it."

"I told you I'm just average. I'm not a hero. I can't save anyone, not even myself... I feel I'm getting sick and dizzy."

"Just focus, Seloren. You're not average. Maybe you'd like to believe that, just so you can have an excuse to give up. But average people don't reach high levels of performance in anything because they don't search for it. You do. You are great at what you do and I'm sure you'll also find the cure for the radiation effects. You always get to the depth of things. You don't give up. You found the will to keep me in your life, which is more than average... you know what average people do? They don't know what they want, they don't go for it and they settle for whatever happens to them, without asking questions, without taking initiative to improve it, without even trying to understand their own life, without any hope of a dream coming true. You're not like that. You'll get that knife from my pocket."

"Nice speech, but you've hidden the damn knife in the inside pocket and I'm getting dizzy in the process, hanging upside down in here."

"You're special. You're actually brilliant, and that's why those people are after you."

"Here come the compliments... Making me feel better about myself won't help me reach your knife, you know."

"I mean it. I'm not saying it just to make you believe. If anyone can get to the bottom of this global problem, it's you. And if anyone can get that knife, it's you. I wish I could help you see that. I know it's a little late to tell you, but I've been getting threatening phone calls recently. And yet it didn't matter, I still wanted to be with you because

I believe in us.”

She didn't seem surprised.

“They told you to leave me alone, right?”

“You know about that?”

“I've been getting some unsettling phone calls too. The bastards said I shouldn't mess with you cause you'll bring me much trouble. They also asked me to forget about the conference. They demanded to deliver my USB flash drive to them.”

“And did you?”

“Of course not. It's in my shoe.”

I smiled, amused by the place she had chosen to hide the flash drive.

“Why didn't you say anything about it to me?”

“I wanted to keep you out of it.”

I was silent for a moment. I suddenly understood she had been under extreme pressure and yet had chosen to protect me somehow. That meant she still loved me, even if she wasn't aware of it.

“Have you reached the knife?”

“No. And I'm feeling weak.”

I was getting the same nauseating sensation from the subtle poisoning. I understood we could lose consciousness soon. I raised my feet and hit the car window with my boots. Once, twice, until the glass smashed to pieces. Air was starting to come inside.

“Got it!” I heard Seloren say and she handed me the knife.

I cut the cords around my wrists, then untied her hands too.

We got out of the car through the smashed window. Then we

lifted the sliding door of the garage, enough to crawl outside. The street was empty. It was a residential area with high fences and silent houses.

I noticed Seloren had lost her glasses in the garage.

"Can you manage without glasses? Should we look for them?"

"I don't care. Let's just get out of here."

"We can't go back to the hotel. They'll be waiting for us there."

"So what do we do now? Go to the police?"

"And tell them what? That a taxi driver locked us in a garage? I've got a better idea: let's go to the mountain cabin that I booked for us before this trip. You'll have time to figure out how to make the information available to those scientists. And we'll breathe fresh air... I'm sure the radiation levels are low up there."

I was convinced it would be the best thing for us, to get away together.

She didn't think about it too much. Any trace of resistance she had felt before had remained behind us, in the garage we escaped from. She shrugged, looking in the distance.

"Okay... nothing left to lose, I guess... we could go there instead."

I smiled.

"This time, we'll get closer seats on the plane."

Chapter 2

Lovers Again

The cabin was at an altitude where snow had covered everything in thick heaps of fluffy, cold dunes. The woods were silent and one could only hear the mountain wind swishing through fir trees and snow loaded pine branches. There was a small town where we got some bags of groceries, gloves, winter hats and two new mobile phones, even though we weren't sure about the signal up in the woods.

Seloren looked at the tall cliffs that were lost in lazy clouds.

"So how are we gonna get up there?"

"We're not going to the top. The cabin is somewhere... over there."

I pointed to the middle of the mountain where the forest was dense, under a wide plateau of snow enclosing a small lake, its water gleaming in the sun, reflecting the clear sky in the distance.

I explained:

"There's only a forest road going in that direction and right now it's covered by snow."

"Great. Let me ask you again: how did you say we were gonna get to that cabin?"

I really enjoyed the answer. I pointed to the shiny vehicles parked near us:

“By snowmobile. Actually, I rented two of them One for me and one for you.”

Seloren looked at me in disbelief. I was already having a good time, watching her expression turn from surprise to amusement:

“And you expect me to ride that high up the mountain?”

“Yep, I do. You'll have fun with it, I promise!”

“Don't promise me anything, Ky. I've never been on one of these before.”

“Aren't you tempted to see what it's like?”

She adjusted the woolen hat on her head, thinking. I could see she already envisioned the possibilities. There was a spark of curiosity and sudden excitement in her eyes. She looked like a teenager glancing at a roller coaster ticket. I was glad to finally see her begin to feel enchanted again by what was ahead of her. She had seemed so distant and reserved for too long, and yet the new adventure revived her mood and I could hear joy in her voice:

“I'll give it a try.”

“Great! Let's go!”

I showed her the basic principles of riding the snowmobile. Then we climbed on and started the engines.

“You go ahead”, she said. “I'll try to keep up, unless I roll over in the snow and you'll have to bring some reindeer and a sleigh to get me out.”

“Don't worry, it's not so difficult. Escaping from that taxi was a lot more challenging.”

“I wouldn't bet on it.”

There she was, the Seloren I used to know, coming to light again. Her cheerful and playful tone reminded me of the time when we had no worries, even if a war was going on around us. It suddenly seemed to me I had been waiting for years to be there with her: just us and the mountains and an entire universe brimming with love, like the snow loaded trees around us. It was that feeling of a miracle waiting to come true around the corner, as the sunlight was reflecting dancing auras on the path ahead of us and trees scattered fluffy snow flakes on our heads, while we were enjoying the ride as if we had won the lottery of freedom. I was certain we had won so much more than a moment of happiness: we had discovered one of the best gifts life could ever bring - the love we had for each other. I knew Seloren was close to remembering it as it had been long ago. I knew she still had it in her heart and it could never be completely lost.

We arrived at the cabin full of hope and joy. The fresh mountain air seemed to give us a high sensation. The heaps of snow spreading everywhere around had a smell of cold and fluff, a soft and quiet presence.

"It's like that place where we met for the first time", I said when we got off the snowmobiles. "Remember?"

She looked around and her smile faded somehow. Suddenly, she became silent. I wondered what was wrong.

"Is it just my impression, or you don't like being reminded of the past?"

"I don't remember the past. That's the problem."

"It's okay. You will, someday. And even if you don't... we can enjoy

the present and make it more significant than the past.”

She didn't seem convinced of my belief. I wanted to remain optimistic, but she had some reserve regarding the feelings and interactions she couldn't bring out of the dark. I didn't want to ask if she'd met guys who meant so much more to her than me, because I knew I wouldn't like the answer. As it was, she could easily compare a lost memory to a more recent, more fulfilling experience, only to my disadvantage. I may have been unwise in many ways, but I was smart enough not to ask that question to her. I could have been the best love of her life and she wouldn't know it. So there was no point in comparing anyone to me. I was prepared to let it slip away, instead of setting a trap for myself. I believed it was better to stand up alone than to stand down in a line.

We went inside the cabin. Everything was made of wood. There was an upstairs bedroom with wooden beds and wooden walls. There was a fireplace and I quickly found some chopped wood on the back porch. As soon as I made the fire the temperature started to change in the rooms, even if it still felt like a chilly cavern.

Seloren curled up in an armchair, with a blanket around her shoulders and her hat still on, checking the phone.

“Is there any signal?” I asked, while tending to the fire.

“It's faint and unstable. I'm not sure we could call anyone from up here.”

“Maybe that's a good thing.”

“How?”

“Nobody can call us, nobody knows where we are.”

And I smiled. She shook her head.

"I must reach out to the other scientists. I missed the conference and I didn't deliver the information I discovered."

"But you don't have their numbers. You lost your phone."

"I had a list of emails in my briefcase. It was taken away by the... whoever they were."

"You still have the flash drive."

"If I could access my email, I would find some contact numbers on the invitation flier that I received when I was notified about the conference. But the signal is almost inactive."

"We'll go to an internet cafe tomorrow. You'll get those numbers. For now, forget about everything."

"That shouldn't be too hard. It's freezing in this cabin."

"I'll make us some tea."

"I wonder if there's any hot water. I could use a shower..."

I looked at her, as she was resting comfortably under the blanket and the image from my dream flashed before my eyes. I still couldn't get it: why had I dreamed about such an audacious, amazingly appealing closeness when she was clearly shutting off her attraction to me, avoiding it on purpose?

The cabin had central heating, functioning on wood as well. I made sure the hot water was running. In the meantime, she went into the shower and I made some tea, for the gingerbread cookies we had brought to the cabin. The smell of shampoo and shower gel seeped into the living room when Seloren returned, wrapped in a long woolen jumper, rubbing a towel on her wet hair.

I couldn't help sighing, when I saw her.

"You can't do this to me."

She stopped moving the towel around her head and stared at me attentively.

"What am I doing to you now?"

"Don't tell me you forgot when you said let's do it in the bathroom."

"I must have said a lot of things back then... You seem to know much more than I can recall."

I went on:

"You also probably don't remember when you said you liked me most when I was wet from the rain. And when I put my head under the sink, to drink the tap water from the washing room."

Her eyes flashed for a second.

"Oh, I think that just surfaced in my mind... you entered the dorm and water was dripping from your head to your shoulders. I was on my bed in the barrack. It was in the first days after we met. I thought you were totally out of your mind... and not in bad way to say the least."

"You couldn't take your eyes off me in that moment... it was the first time your attraction to me was obvious, with that overwhelming light in your smile. I didn't understand it then: what's with you and water anyway?"

"I don't know."

"You know water means emotion?"

She placed the towel on the chair and went to check the tea that was steaming in the cups.

I noticed she didn't answer, trying to change the conversation topic:

"So what time are we going to the internet tomorrow?"

I was astounded by her stubborn attempt to divert me from what mattered most between us: if love was still what we had together, I wasn't going to just give it up.

"I see what you're doing here. You've been doing it for a while now and probably for many years. You shut down your emotions. You're afraid you'll be too vulnerable if you let yourself feel what is unpredictably deeper than the scientific data you're preoccupied with. You're afraid of the unexplained things that make you more than average, so you level them down instead of letting them expand and take you beyond. You think you'll suffer for it, so you'd rather remain unmoved from your tasks... but it's just a cover."

She became defensive.

"These scientific tasks are indeed more important. They are who I am. I must keep my head clear, keep my cool and not make any mistakes when I analyze and discover the results. People's lives depend on it. I can't focus on how I feel."

She sat down, holding the hot cup in her hands, watching the steam dance on the surface of the tea. I wanted to reach to her heart and I knew I had to make her see the truth.

"I understand the nature of your profession, but I think there's someone very afraid underneath that cool and collected attitude you struggle to maintain. You can't extinguish the side of you that cares, just because you're afraid to be disappointed. You convinced yourself

that emotions are damaging to your structure and you decided to avoid and diminish them. That's how you started to forget, you denied your own feelings. You wanted to erase them. Instead, you were just hiding them from yourself."

She looked at me. For the first time in many days, her eyes had a direct, intense glare, as if something deep and painful was coming to light.

"I might not remember everything like you do, but I never forgot for one second in so many years that I lost you! And I'm too afraid I'm gonna lose you again..."

Her eyes almost filled with tears and she put down the cup on the table. She sank in the chair, covering her face with her hands. I came closer, kneeling in front of her. She got down on the floor too, while her crying took over and she started sobbing. I didn't know if it was from the tension of the last days, the despair of the last years or the uncertainty of the present. I didn't know if it was from suppressed feelings or hidden disappointments, desolation or simply being tired. It was the second time in my life I saw her cry and I couldn't let her sink into it.

"Hey, it's alright... it's gonna be fine. You won't lose me... not now, not ever."

I took her hands slowly away from her wet face, revealing her shiny eyes. She stared at me, trying to smile, and at that moment I saw her teenage soul right in front of me, open and honestly, irrevocably in love. I leaned forward and I kissed her, sliding my arms around her and she surrendered to it with a sigh of relief. We rolled

over on the carpet, melting in a hungry kiss and forgetting where we were, sharing the warmth that was rising in our hearts, the craving that had been lurking for so many years of being absent from each other.

We melted together on the floor, kissing for endless minutes until her tears were dry and her cheeks started to blush, while her breathing became deeper and irregular. My hands reached under her woolen sweater, touching her warm soft breasts, and I felt her fingers sinking in my hair, her legs tightening her grip behind my back.

“Do you want me?” I whispered to her.

“Do you even have to ask?”

It wasn't necessary to ask, because her body and her soul had already shown to me in that hungry embrace that she was anticipating it. However, I insisted on hearing it from her, to have it spoken out loud in undeniable words, for the time she had kept me away, the years we had lost in absent silence.

“Tell me.”

“I want you, Ky”, she replied with her eyes closed in a dreamy fever. “I missed you so much.”

“Say you truly want me now... or there'll be no sex happening.”

She opened her eyes and looked directly into mine, deeply longing for me, the same as years ago when she had asked me, almost in a prayer, to get into her bed and spend the night.

“No sex has never worked for me,” she confessed, warning me of it.

I knew that. She had been the one initiating it most of the time,

in the beginning.

I paused above her.

"Are we gonna finish what we started?"

"You're trembling", she said.

"I don't know why. You're shivering too, by the way..."

It must have been the anticipation and the excitement.

I was shaking harder and she held me tight, looking steadily in my eyes. I got lost in the brightness of her stare.

"I want us to be together", she assured me.

In my mind, I was still halted by the years we'd been apart. It was as if we were two new persons, getting to know each other again, from the beginning.

"I need to know that I'm what you really want, before we do anything."

She didn't hesitate – instead, there was eagerness in her voice:

"I really want to feel you inside me, Ky... Let's do it."

It was more than I needed to set my mind on fire. Only she could have said those words to me in such a way that my soul would rise up through the doors of another level of awareness, like a deeper revelation, setting me free of any reserve. The desire was irresistible.

I moved closer and she responded, adjusting herself to make it easy, breathing at the same time with me, picking up on my rhythm and increasing it. Our embrace was beyond expectations. We let it flow like water, smooth and going deeper with each move. Neither of us considered the new discovered intimacy a trophy or a confirmation and we weren't searching for a validation of each other's need to be

worthy of love, but we seemed to find something more than that: a new way of being alive. An unexpected gift of happiness unwrapped itself for us. We already had it in our minds, but it was as if we wanted to make each other see it come true, like a dream that needed to happen instantaneously. We went ahead, searching for it as if plunging into an ocean, into a tide that swept us on and on, rolling around with us while we were exploring each other in a new way, for the first time. We didn't stop until we surpassed the edge of every boundary we had ever imagined that could stand in the way of the new life we wanted ahead of us, until we envisioned reality finally changing into a new beginning, a new existence in a universe that would never take us from each other again. We redefined ourselves, our notions of each other and the world around us in a reinventing process. It was almost as if the world began again with us making love to each other. We sank into love as if to make one another believe it was infinitely and truly ours, forever.

The next morning I woke up in the bedroom. I was leaning halfway on the edge of the bed. Light was coming from the window on the ceiling. I could see the sky and the snow flakes landing on the glass. I wondered if it had been a dream. I recalled making love to Seloren the entire night. It had been so powerful, that I could hardly rewind everything in my mind. We had been enjoying it on the floor, in front of the fireplace and then again, up in the blankets of the wooden bedroom, insatiably, endlessly reaching heights of happiness we'd never thought possible. I opened my eyes to the morning light and yawned. Seloren was sleeping on the other side of the bed. We were

both naked under the sheets. I didn't know when and how we had removed our clothes, because it had been such a frantic, incredible night... My mind was light and my spirit lifted, ecstatic in a way I discovered as if it was the first day of my life.

I slipped out of the bed and into the shower. I turned on the warm water, letting it run on my head and down my body, enjoying the peaceful, serene sensation of absolute happiness. I knew I loved her and she was able and willing to do anything to make my dreams come true, in such an unexpected way, just by being herself.

"Hey you... good morning", I heard Seloren say and I saw her standing in the doorway, looking at my completely wet figure under the shower.

She had a happy smile on her face and I smiled back.

"Hi there..."

I was fully aware of standing naked in front of her, but it seemed so easy to do that, without even thinking for a second about it.

It seemed she was feeling safe in my presence too, because she stepped forward, getting closer and sliding under the curtain of water with me. I took a step sideways to let her stand near. Her hand reached for the shower knob and turned the water heat up.

"Should I find a bathrobe or something?" I asked her.

She touched my back with her hand, softly caressing the scars from the war.

"You don't need anything. You're perfect."

After we had explored each other the entire night, the sight of our bodies in daylight was still something new and enticing. It felt

wonderful to be completely naked in front of one another. It was liberating. I loved it. I felt at ease. I didn't feel exposed, but happy to be myself without any shields.

"I should write a message to your parents", she joked.

"Why would you do that?"

"To thank them for your existence."

And she looked in my eyes with that light that I recognized, that overwhelming brightness. I was amazed at the fact that she was really in love with me.

She turned to embrace me under the running hot water and we kissed, our wet faces enjoying the shower on our skin. I was about to kiss every part of her, through the steam and splashing drops that were spreading everywhere.

"You know what", I said between kisses. "We're finally doing it in the bathroom, as you always wanted..."

After an hour spent in the shower, we got dressed and went out in town, to find an internet connection and get the list of phone numbers from the conference flier.

She retrieved the list from her email, accessing the wireless signal of a coffee shop where we had breakfast. She immediately started calling the scientists, explaining and discussing details I really didn't listen to. I was eating my sandwich, sipping coffee and watching her as she continued the conversation on the phone, glancing out the window at the snow covered forests... and I was thinking to myself how beautiful, how splendidly incredible and stunning she was and how grateful I felt that such an amazing creature had been mine the

night before... mine, the whole night... and in the morning again. It was inspiring to me that we were absolutely together, so madly in love, after I had almost given up on us.

"I'm so glad I agreed to come here with you", she told me, after she ended the conversation over the phone and placed it on the table. "I wasn't hoping anymore we'd find each other like this... but now... it's so much more than before."

"It's like a honeymoon, right?"

She laughed.

"Yeah, except I'm not very interested in marriage."

It was something unexpected, because she had dreamed about us getting married in the past. However, the many years of being on her own, independent and avoiding attachment had probably shifted her perspective. I didn't want to insist on it, because I'd never been one to believe in getting married just for the sake of a piece of paper, so it didn't matter to me. Having found love with her was more important than our social status. I replied casually:

"Me neither... But it's nice to see what it's like to love without the limitations of war, other people or unnecessary worries... I'm happy to finally be free with you."

She looked away.

"I'm still worried, nevertheless..."

"What did you find out from those scientists?"

"There will be another conference next week. I could go to present the information on the flash drive, but I don't know which way would be safe. Those people who attacked us... they can be anywhere:

on the train, on the plane... just anywhere. How do we avoid them?"

I thought about something.

"There may be a way to get you where you need to be. Let me make a phone call."

I dialed the number of the fire department where I had worked in the recent months, ever since the radiation had affected the world. I discussed with the management and explained the situation was urgent, of utmost importance. I was granted the request for assistance.

"Well, I think I arranged something for you", I told Seloren. "We have to wait until tomorrow morning and we'll find an answer to this."

We returned to the cabin. We spent hours cuddling on the couch, watching movies and having lunch, warm soup and baked potatoes, that we prepared together. Inevitably, soon enough we ended up in each other's arms, making love again. It was like a new discovered feeling, completely liberating. In the evening, we went for a walk outside. The silent mountains and the bright stars above, the shadows of the trees, the whispering branches, everything reminded me of the place where we had met for the first time. I didn't know what the future could bring us, but I knew we wouldn't drift away, not if we really wanted to remain together. After only two days in the fresh air Seloren seemed to feel much better. The radiation effects were dissipating. Her appetite was healthier and there was a new glow in her eyes.

We paused in the moonlight, looking around at the mysterious forests. The lake had a thin layer of ice on its edges, but the dark

water reflected the brightness of the night sky, in the middle of the mountains. It was impressive being there. Either our elated mood or the surroundings made the moment mesmerizing and we glanced at the breathtaking view in a daze.

“I have a surprise for you tonight”, she said, leaning against me and smiling through the darkness.

“Do you? What kind of surprise? Like this?”

I slowly unzipped her winter jacket. She laughed and grabbed my hands, stopping me before I reached the end of the zipper.

“No, not here.”

“Why not? Don't tell me you're suddenly shy with me...”

“Not shy, but cold, Ky! I'm freezing. Let's go back to the cabin! We walked enough.”

“Okay.”

We returned to the warmth of the wooden cabin. After keeping the fire burning for days in the fireplace and the central heating, the house was cozy and comfortable. Seloren made me wait in the living room and went upstairs to get the surprise she had mentioned. When she returned, I looked at her and remained speechless.

“Wow... just... wow!”

I stared at her, stunned by her apparition. She was dressed in a black mini skirt, high heeled shoes and burgundy colored blouse that fell on her thin shoulders in waves. It made her look elegant, fragile and alluring at the same time. She had let her hair down and I noticed golden earrings, matching her sparkling eyes. I stood up, amazed and impressed by the unexpected sight.

"This is a surprise, for sure."

She noticed my hypnotized stare and explained simply:

"I saw how you reacted when you met me dressed for the conference. I wouldn't have thought you'd care about these things... I wanted to do this for you. I know it's probably not the time and place, but I wanted to make the gesture anyway."

I suddenly realized we hadn't danced together in a long time. I plugged the stereo and let the music create a dreamy mood. The song I selected was slow.

"Come dance with me", I said and took her in my arms, carefully touching the velvet fabric that covered her.

She smiled, sliding her hands around my neck. We swayed together, listening to the music. Just holding her was making the night seem magical. The flames from the fireplace were flickering light between us.

"I know this song", she said, listening to the lyrics. *"Because the sky is blue... love is all, love is you..."*

"You wrote the words for me on a note, when we were in the army."

"I listen to this song all the time."

I wondered if she had been listening to it and thinking about me, all those years. I wished and wanted to believe that, even if she had lost her memories, the feeling was undeniably present... she had accepted, embraced and turned it into a new level of truth the night before. There was no going back to being just friends. Not anymore... not ever again...

The next morning, she prepared to leave for the conference. We had a quick breakfast of toast, cheese and tea and we went outside to wait for the ride.

I hadn't told her what kind of ride she would get, and I didn't reveal anything about it, not even until the last minute. It was supposed to be under the radar, and I couldn't risk us being listened to, so I didn't mention what was about to happen, not to undermine the entire plan. Instead of going downhill to town, we went up to the snowy plateau, where we waited.

I was wondering if the ride would be there, or some other unwanted turn of events. In a few minutes, we heard an engine, coming from around the rocky cliffs.

She looked up.

"What's that?"

"Your ride: it's here."

The sound was unmistakable: a helicopter propeller. It appeared from behind the mountain, scattering the snow everywhere in a whirlwind of white blizzard. It landed near us on the plateau, by the lake and the door opened. I recognized the crew from the firefighter department, but there were also two men in suits. I stepped towards the open door of the chopper, trying to talk to the men who had come to ensure the safe ride for Seloren.

"We're from the secret service", they addressed me. "We're having an investigation going on and your girlfriend can provide us valuable information."

"Yes, she sure can. But please do watch out for her at that

conference. We've been already attacked and kidnapped once and we hardly escaped. I wouldn't want it to happen to her again."

"Don't worry. We're here for that reason. We'll be there with her."

I made a sign to Seloren and she approached the helicopter trustingly.

I suddenly understood that she trusted the situation because she trusted me, before anything.

I helped her get on and closed the glass door.

She saw me standing there and figured out I wasn't coming. There wasn't room for me on that chopper. It was a one person ride. It had come for her, and her alone.

She placed her hand on the glass door, in a gesture that showed concern, unable to touch me anymore and reluctant to separate herself from me.

"And you? What are you gonna do?" she asked through the propeller noise.

I looked at the helicopter.

"I think I'll go back home. I have a plan."

"Be careful, Ky! You saw what happened."

"I'll be fine! Don't worry about me."

My words were lost in the snow while distance increased between us. The helicopter had taken off and was already flying away. I waved to her, as she disappeared in a swirl of white blizzard.

I knew what I wanted to do: I planned to become a helicopter pilot. I would enroll on a training course from the fire department and I would take flying lessons.

"Next time, I'll be the one to pick you up for a ride across the sky", I promised her in my mind.

Chapter 3

Underwater Lovers

I didn't know that I wouldn't get to see her again for a long time, when I watched the helicopter disappear beyond the mountains.

I enrolled on that training program for emergency rescues and I started taking flight lessons for the fire department chopper. I didn't hear from Seloren, but I saw news on television, about some discovery related to the radiation and then it was kept quiet. I was told by some agents who contacted me that Seloren was on a witness protection program and had been transferred to a secret location where she was working in a lab. I was advised not to reach out to her, and wait until that whole thing was over. Somehow, it seemed to me that the request for distance was not much different from the other group that had attacked us. I wondered about the big interests, money, business or political reasons that prompted those organizations to require Seloren's scientific expertise. In any case, we were caught in the middle, metaphorically blindfolded, because we didn't know what was being planned in the shadows. Or maybe she knew more, but I could

only wait to find out what might happen.

I was sure I was continuously being followed and watched by the same people, or by more of them. When I attempted to contact Seloren once on the phone number she had at the cabin, there was no answer. Instead, one evening when I returned from the aerodrome, on my motorbike, I saw the Jeep in the mirror once again. It looked like the same vehicle that had followed me the night I had gone to the airport. It approached my bike dangerously, at high speed. Randomly or not, in front of me there was another car, coming from the opposite direction, also going faster than permitted velocity. It had crossed the line that separated the different sides of the road and was driving directly towards unavoidable collision with me. It was a matter of seconds that I saw this happening before my eyes. I could only decide to steer right, towards the sidewalk, to avoid crashing into the front car. There was also an obstacle by the side of the road: a few big construction stones that seemed to have fallen from a truck, or placed there intentionally by someone. I couldn't avoid the rocks. I grabbed the handle brakes at the last moment, but the front wheel of the motorbike went over the square stones, losing balance and throwing me up in the air. The motorbike fell in the middle of the road, while I flew over and tumbled on the edge of the sidewalk. I saw the sky and the earth upside down and my head hit the pavement. The two cars went by, disappearing from sight.

I got up immediately. My helmet had protected my head from the asphalt. I was sure it saved my life in that moment. I would have gotten my head injured for sure, had I not worn that helmet. As it was,

I only got bruises on my legs and arms. One of my hands was scratched badly, but it was nothing compared to what could have happened. I wondered if the second car, coming from the opposite direction and passing over the continuous line, had been intentionally doing that, or the driver had been drunk. In any case, I couldn't report the vehicles, since I hadn't seen the numbers of their license plates. They were gone. The road was empty. I picked up the motorbike and resumed my way. Nothing much was damaged, except my trust in the traffic participants. It was proof that there was a lot more going on than it seemed. The war may have been over in the open, but it continued in a covert manner, hidden and sneaky, unpredictable and relentless.

I knew I couldn't find Seloren on my own. She had to be the one to look for me instead, but she was hidden somewhere out of reach, most probably not allowed to contact me.

I focused on finishing the flight lessons. I enjoyed the helicopter rides and the way I could pilot such a big flying machine. It was fascinating to be up there, free between the sky and the earth.

I learned to deal with various emergency situations: releasing fire extinguisher from the air, picking up victims from roofs or trees, getting closer to the water surface to help someone from drowning or just transporting patients from one hospital to another. There were many things to do and something was frequently happening that required intervention.

To me, it was thrilling to hear the propeller start spinning and to see the chopper lift in the air. I enjoyed it and I was called to action as

soon as I got the pilot license.

After a few missions, I was getting the hang of it and looking forward to piloting the helicopter each new morning. I had no expectation to see Seloren anywhere, anytime soon. I had decided to let it rest in the back of my mind. I believed that, if we were meant to be, we would meet somewhere, somehow – otherwise, it was out of my hands to find her and convince her to stay.

One day, our paths finally crossed again.

I was called for a mission to take someone to a restricted area. I was told it was a highly secret mission at some secluded undisclosed location, without any other possibility to get there except by flying. There were no roads and no maps. I was given the flight coordinates and requested to wait with the helicopter on the roof of a government building. I was made to sign a contract that I would not discuss it with anyone and not ask any questions.

The propeller was spinning. I was looking ahead, waiting. I had to keep the engine running so I could take off quickly. It was part of the contract and the instructions: take off immediately, fly fast without delay, drop the passenger and return without having seen or heard anything.

The door opened and someone got inside, sitting down and buckling the seat belt. Then, I only heard a calm voice say:

“Let's go.”

I recognized her at once.

I wasn't supposed to turn my head around, so I piloted the chopper up from the building, without looking back. My heartbeat had

gotten suddenly very rapid and a wave of warmth enveloped me from my head to my feet. I didn't speak for a few minutes, but I couldn't remain silent or still for too long.

"I'm not allowed to look at you or address you in any way, but I know it's you."

I could distinguish her figure in the reflection of the glass shield in front of me.

"I must say it's incredibly amazing to see you again, Seloren."

It was thrilling to think she was sitting there, less than one meter away. I wondered if she had recognized me too. She took her time before she replied:

"It's okay, Ky. I won't report you for it."

I smiled, even though I couldn't decide from her voice if she was joking or simply stating the truth. She remained calm and I knew she was trying to maintain the cool and reserved attitude of a scientist. I knew she had had time to rehearse that detachment in my absence. I couldn't guess what she was thinking or feeling anymore. Flashes of our nights together went through my mind: her soft and passionate touch, her arms around me, her warm kisses...

"So you're saying I can look at you and not get in trouble for it?"

"You can look. You won't get in any trouble."

I turned and quickly stole a glance at her. She was wearing sunglasses and a wide straw hat, a white lab robe and keeping a seemingly important briefcase nearby.

"How are you?" I asked her. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, I am. I think you'd better watch where you're flying, Mister

Pilot.”

I smiled briefly and turned my head to the sight ahead.

“Did they tell you I'd be the one to take you there?”

“No, they didn't. What a fantastic turn of events! You're the pilot... I'm impressed! When did you get your license?”

“A few months ago”, I answered proudly.

“I had no idea.”

“You were nowhere to be found.”

“I was in a place where I couldn't contact anyone. We were working on something important. I was part of an international team of scientists. I still am. There's a lot we have to do.”

“So you're going to remain hidden?”

“Yes.”

“For how long? Are you ever coming back?”

“I don't know. It's until we find the solution to something.”

“To what? The radiation?”

She was silent for a moment. I understood she wasn't allowed to tell me. She hesitated, then decided to explain:

“The radiation is just a consequence and only a small part of the whole thing. There are some people who caused it. There are underground facilities that use nuclear power in the wrong way. The planet's already distorted its electromagnetic field and atomic components of the atmosphere. We're trying to change that by ultrasound waves, and many other devices. We've built a power plant that will emit ultrasound waves to divert the radiation flux to space. The turbines that will disperse electrically charged particles into the

atmosphere are going to restore the ecological balance of the desert. We're hoping to repair the planet's environment too. We're going to replace the toxic industries with renewable energy devices. If this power plant does the trick, very soon city by city will become a part of that. This planet will be restored and no longer damaged by human irresponsibility."

"Are you sure about it?"

"I'm sure. We're almost there: look!"

I could see it from high above: the desert, endless dunes of sand, and suddenly, a white chalk building with towers and round antennas, surrounded by green trees and foliage overflowing under a sprinkling irrigation system of silver pipes shining in sunlight.

I noticed the painted green circle of the landing site and brought the helicopter above it, setting it slowly on the ground. I knew she would immediately get off and disappear in that building.

"Am I going to see you again?" I asked her.

I turned my head to look at her. She stopped for a second, before getting out. Her sunglasses flashed, reflecting the bright light.

"I hope so, Ky."

And then she closed the glass door.

I took off, watching the building become smaller and smaller, from the air.

I had to cool off my head, after having seen her: the urge to take her in my arms had been so hard to resist, like a huge wave smashing in my mind, heating up my senses. I couldn't deny the attraction I felt for her.

Two weeks went by without any significant event, except for a few flights to extinguish some fires in the fields. And then I was called for a secret mission again. I was told to be extremely attentive while delivering some government treasure to an undisclosed destination. However, I recognized the coordinates of the desert ecological base and hoped I would meet Seloren again.

My wish came true: the passenger was her, once more.

“Good morning, Ky” she said smiling, boarding my helicopter.

She had the same wide hat, sunglasses and briefcase, only this time she was wearing a t-shirt and jeans. She could be wearing anything and still look irresistibly stunning. I stared at her, enchanted to see that beautiful apparition that made the daylight brighter. Suddenly, everything seemed better.

“Good morning indeed”, I said and we lifted up in the air.

I was confident anytime we were together, I believed in our connection being stronger than unpredictable circumstances. I was happy and started conversation, despite the strict instructions I'd been given to remain silent:

“So you're the government treasure the secret service told me to fly across the desert?”

“I think the treasure is in this briefcase.”

“And you're not allowed to tell me the content. Let me guess: it's your USB flash drive! You could have placed it in your sneakers instead of that complicated briefcase.”

“You're in a good mood today”, she noticed.

I could feel her eyes on me, watching attentively, contemplating

my movements at the flight board. I continued to speak, glancing at her reflection in the glass:

“I'm happy you're here again. I enjoy flying with you to that oasis in the desert.”

She smiled.

“Well, that oasis is actually a big center for environmental change. And it's expanding. It advances every day... The area is an entire complex now and it will become a chain of stations soon.”

From up above, I could already see what she was describing: water had spread over a large portion of sand, forming a huge turquoise lake around the center building, interspersed with islands of green vegetation and silver irrigation pipes. Palm trees and rotating antennas accompanied the wooden bridges that connected the islands in a net. Watching from the air, it looked like a multiple hexagon complex.

“Why hexagons? Is there a reason for choosing that shape?”

“Hexagons make the best use of space. Circles can't fit together to cover everything, but hexagons do. We learned it from bees... we think it's best to follow examples from nature.”

“You're really like busy bees... at this speed, the entire desert will be a tropical resort very soon.”

She sounded calm and convinced:

“It will be much more than that. And hopefully, the entire planet will benefit from it, clean fresh air and balanced environment.”

I knew I wasn't supposed to ask anymore questions, but I was curious:

“Where did you get that water? It looks like tons of it.”

“It's from an underground source. We're bringing it to the surface. There's a system of greenhouse recycling that prevents it from evaporating and drying. We capture, condense the vapors and redirect them into irrigation pipes. This way, the new water reserve is continuously replenished.”

She added, casually but a bit concerned:

“Of course, nobody knows it yet in the outside world. Except for you, now.”

“I won't go around telling about it. Don't worry.”

I hovered the helicopter above the complex, descending in a spiral to the landing site.

When she opened the door to get out, I could smell the humid warm air and vegetation scent seeping in from the islands. I was tempted to accompany her, but I wasn't allowed to get beyond the helicopter doorway. I watched her walk away towards the bridge across the azure water that undulated in small waves and ripples from the propeller storm. She had to hold her hat with one hand, or it would have been blown off into the air. I waited until she was out of sight, then took off, distancing myself from that area, returning to the scenery of the dry, seemingly endless desert. And I had to do my best to focus on flying, as images of us embracing couldn't disappear from my mind.

I was almost certain that chances were in our favor, although the situation was not exactly ideal for us. However, I believed we would be together anyway... and soon.

I was right.

Meeting her again confirmed that to me in a few days.

I became her personal pilot. The secret service gave me that opportunity, after the two flights that had been more of a preliminary test. I found out later that in the end, it had also been her request that suggested I should accompany her on and off that base. She had chosen me despite other pilots that flew her a few times. Because I and her knew each other from the past, the secret service agreed to let me be the one to accomplish the mission, considering I would be more careful about her safety than the other guys who didn't feel anything on a personal level. Usually, any mission would have required lack of involvement, but this time it was different: it mattered otherwise. I had the advantage of being her favorite choice too. And it was settled. I was the number one pilot: the one and only.

I was going to fly her to the station, wait until she took samples of soil, water and leaves, then fly her back to the government secret lab where they kept track of their progress and everything else.

The missions became for us simple getaway trips: every two or three days we flew together to the base in the desert, spent a few hours there, then got back to the lab in the city. It was almost like having unplanned dates happen unexpectedly.

I was so happy, I couldn't believe how lucky I was to finally get to spend more time around her, after I had missed being with her for so long. Keeping my hands away from touching her was extremely hard to accomplish, but I tried to behave professionally so I pretended to accompany her simply and casually, just as a pilot on the job. I usually

waited for her outside, on the landing site. I would turn off the helicopter engine, let the propeller rest while I would walk around, looking at the clear blue water, the transparent waves, the palm trees swaying in the breeze, the sparkling drops of water from the irrigation pipes. It was like a dreamland, expanding with each new day further and further along in the desert.

I usually waited one or two hours for Seloren, looking around and reveling in her presence when she showed up. It was hard to contain my impulse to take her in my arms whenever she walked towards me. I yearned to hold and touch her again, sink my hands in her hair, melt my lips into hers, trace my fingertips on her breasts, feel her chest breathe so close to my heart that my mind would light up in flames, longing to spoil and cherish her for hours, to leave everything else aside and make love to her until she would abandon her senses to complete happiness. I envisioned discovering her again and again - and often I couldn't shake from my mind the sight of us rolling together, embracing fervently in an infinity of possibilities. Sometimes, I let my thoughts wander into a realm of hypnotizing excitement, as my heart would beat faster each second. I tried not to think about it when I was piloting the helicopter though. Her presence there near me, however, made me feel so free to imagine anything I wanted. From time to time, she stared at me, unsure of what was on my mind. She watched me silently, but I could feel her eager curiosity in her inquisitive glance. I was aware of her energy flowing towards me, enveloping me like a charm. I wondered if she could guess my thoughts - if she realized how much I wanted her. I hoped she could

understand and decide to do something about it, but she remained focused on her tasks, every time.

And I couldn't interfere: I was the pilot.

There were moments when I could see her eyes lost in a dreamy, absent stare, directed at me and I was sure we were thinking about the same thing. Our connection went high above our surroundings, invincible, implacable, undeniable. When we didn't speak, the air was filled with sparkling attraction, so obvious that I could have sworn it would turn into visible electricity very soon. I don't know how we both resisted the urge to jump into each other's arms so many times when we flew above the desert, in the ardent heat of blazing sunlight.

One day, when I was staring at the azure waves beneath the wooden bridge where I was waiting for her, I realized one essential truth of life. I told myself: *"as much as people need water to exist, they also need love. People are made of water and they are made of love. They are made of dreams and flowing wishes, creating reality according to what is in their souls and minds."*

It was liberating to understand something so simple yet so essential near the oasis that had been invented and built to save the world from irresponsible chaos, toxic radiation and electromagnetic collapse. As long as water and love existed, everything was possible. There hadn't been that much damage done that water couldn't mend. Water was powerful. Love was miraculously powerful too. Being alive was a gift that contained the offer of having both water and love together, to keep life going. They were inseparable, just like Seloren and I. That was when I saw her reflection in the undulating waves of

the turquoise pond. She had come to stand by my side, looking at the water.

"It's amazing, isn't it", she spoke softly, as if not to disturb the peaceful silence of the palm trees and the clarity of the lagoon.

"It is", I smiled. "And you're amazing too. Ready to go?"

She glanced at me as if she knew something I didn't, serenely content somehow. She shook her head.

"Not today, Ky."

And she smiled.

I was astounded:

"So... you're not going back today?"

"We're not going back. You and me both."

"How come?"

"The samples are taking longer to sort out. There are many more ponds to check and many more samples to verify before flying them to the lab. It won't be finished until tomorrow morning. I must stay here and orders are that you wait with me."

She winked at me, amused and mysteriously enchanted by something:

"We're spending the night in this place."

Then she took my hand, before I could process what she'd just revealed about our situation and she went ahead across the wooden bridge, under the fresh green leaves and the humid vapors.

"Let's walk. I'll show you around."

Crossing from one green island to another, we slowly distanced ourselves from the main building in the center. Every bridge was a

passage through arcades of foliage, ivy and strings sustaining tropical trees above translucent water. It was like a fragmented rainforest, distributed equally among the irrigation pipes, endlessly sprinkling shiny drops everywhere. When we set foot on what must have been the tenth island, we were already wet and laughing. We stopped and looked at each other. The air was hot and humid. Sunlight was shimmering in the aura of flying drops like hundreds of fountain springs of light. Seloren took off her hat. Her hair was damp, hanging on her shoulders as she was smiling, happy and free of worries, like I hadn't seen her in a long time. Her wet shirt was stuck to her skin and I couldn't help sliding my glance to the line of her neck and lower, to her chest, as the shape emerged from beyond the thin blouse. She noticed me staring and laughed, grabbing my collar playfully:

“You're wet too! Take this pilot shirt off, now!”

I looked around us. There was only water, palm trees and sand... and the spinning bowl antennas that had been placed everywhere.

“These pilot pants too,” she continued, determined. “Take them off!”

“My pants?”

“Yes! Take everything off.”

“You're the first woman who ever asked me to get undressed.”

“You're damn right, I am. So why don't you do it?”

I looked at her. There was a mixture of irresistible tension release and rising heat in the laughter and burning attraction between us. I was breathing deeply, still feeling the sprinkling warm water on my head, tickling and arousing. I was staring at her. She leaned her head

sideways, glancing at me with a bright, appealing glow on her face – if it was the water on her skin or the love I felt for her, I couldn't tell exactly. In that moment, she was one with the sunlight. I felt inspired and hypnotized at the same time.

“What?” she asked amused, while I couldn't take my eyes off her. “You're staring.”

“Your eyes speak to me in ways I can't explain.”

“Wait until my lips speak to you also...” she started to say, but I didn't let her finish her sentence.

I took a step closer and kissed her before she could continue. My arms grabbed her waist and pulled her to me, until we were stuck to each other, wet and kissing in one long sigh. My hands started to unbutton her shirt and I could feel her fingers unlock my belt, tugging down at my pants. I kept kissing her face softly, feverishly and adoringly, going down to her neck and shoulders, while taking off her shirt. Then we stopped, suddenly realizing that we had defied any stifling imposed restrictions and we were headed straight towards total freedom with each other, in the middle of that newly created paradise.

“Are they watching us with these antennas?” I asked her.

“I don't think so... they might be watching, who knows?”

“I don't care anyway”, I said and took off my shirt. “I don't care about these things like reputation and stuff. Let them talk. I have a mission with you,” I said and kissed her again.

“Interesting mission... Well, gossip and reputation usually make me laugh”, she added, when I gave her a few seconds to breathe

away from me. "Let's just get into the water," she said eagerly.

It was a relief that she was unafraid of what we were about to do under the probable supervision of a spying system of antennas. I admired her natural, unembarrassed decision to be with me despite risky circumstances and unknown consequences.

She turned around and I undid her bra, giving her more kisses on her wet skin.

She let the last piece of underwear slide and jumped into the pond, splashing drops in my face.

"Come on, Ky! It's warm!"

Her invitation was impossible to refuse. I threw away my clothes and jumped next to her, in that clear bright lagoon. It was like the beginning of the world, time seemed endless and our love eternal.

Water reached up to our shoulders. If we advanced further, it would go deeper to our chins and beyond, so we remained there together, in the place where our feet could feel the soft sand underneath. We played with waves, splashing each other for a while, enjoying the sun and the fresh air, while our bodies felt free, standing naked in the water next to one another. Slowly and steadily, I took some steps until the distance between us was irrelevant. I could feel her legs touch mine underwater. Her arms went around my neck and we embraced, getting lost in a kiss. My hands reached to her thighs, helping her up against me. Emotion and excitement made me shiver again, just like the first time we had been intimate after having stayed separated for many years. She rested her elbows on my shoulders and looked gently in my eyes. Water made her almost weightless. I was

holding her up above me, bringing her closer to myself, while I wanted our hearts to find their rhythm together. For a few seconds, we just looked at each other. Shiny drops were dripping from her wet hair and she looked so beautiful, I could feel my heartbeat run faster, while her breasts touched my chest.

“Ah...” she moaned. “Do you always tremble like this when you make love ?”

“I don't know. You tell me”, I replied and we submerged underwater together.

Making love underwater was an unpredictable and extraordinary experience... a wet dream of azure waves, heated kisses, intermittent breathing and liquid dancing moves. I enjoyed immensely watching her eyes gleam with pleasure, knowing I was the one who could make her feel so good until she would forget what didn't matter and remember what was essential in life, in a moment of complete happiness. I let my mind elevate until I reached a point when it seemed to me we were moving together with the water of the entire planet, making waves from ocean to ocean, as the universe opened its doors to us and light rushed in, lifting our embrace in a cosmic flow of energy that was like touching the brightest sun, as one with it for a second. The absolute happiness we shared was overwhelming.

We rested on the shore, holding hands and drying in the warm sunlight, with our eyes closed and our faces touching the soft sand. I fell asleep smiling and woke up to see she had disappeared somewhere. I looked around for my clothes and put on my shirt and boxers. She came from the wooden bridge, walking with bare feet,

careful not to spill something she had in her hand. It was a casserole with food and drinks.

"Are you hungry?" she smiled joyfully.

"Yes... very!"

She sat next to me.

"I brought you some bio food from the fridge."

"What's this?"

I reached for the paper cup.

"Orange juice. Or mango... I'm not sure."

I drank thirstily. I had stayed a long time in the sun, and needed it.

She watched me smiling as I gulped down some pieces of food from the casserole.

The sun was beginning to set over the green islands, reflecting multiple nuances in the changing water. The heat was diminishing unknowingly. Air was cooling off.

I looked around, a bit disoriented:

"Are we late for anything? Are the samples ready?"

She spoke in a calm tone, slightly amused by my sudden concern:

"I told you, we'll remain here tonight, until tomorrow morning. Don't panic. Eat."

"Are you going anywhere?"

"I'm not going anywhere, not anytime soon. I'm staying with you, Ky. Go ahead, finish this casserole. I brought it for you."

"Thanks."

“Here, let me help you.”

She handed me a few morsels, playfully letting my lips brush her fingers as my mouth took the food from her hands. She laughed and we enjoyed it for a while.

“You like me feeding you, don't you! It seems I've got a new pet.”

“I'm not your pet. I'm gonna eat you piece by piece cause you're so delicious!” I grinned and leaned over to kiss her neck.

She giggled.

“Finish your food, Ky. I'll have to throw it to the fish otherwise.”

“Okay. I'll be good.”

I ate everything, not even asking what each piece of food represented or was made of. I trusted her and I was too hungry to waste time asking questions.

She unwrapped an ice cream and scooped spoonfuls of it, digging into the pastel pink. I was staring at her lips, that already had little smears of melting sweetness.

She saw me stare and paused.

“Want some?”

She raised the teaspoon in the air, but then suddenly decided otherwise, placed the content in her mouth and leaned over, kissing me unexpectedly. I tasted the ice cream directly from her soft tongue and we rolled in the sand again, enjoying each other for a while and forgetting about dessert.

At night, the sand was cold and the stars above were bright, glimmering everywhere in billion lights, spreading like scattered blue diamonds across the dark sky. I hadn't seen so many anywhere else. It

almost looked like a vault, going round, high up in the universe, mysteriously witnessing the insignificant earthly activities from a majestic silence. We were on an outside terrace of the main building, right next to the room we had been accommodated in. It was a simple and efficient guest room with glass doors leading to a balcony that overlooked the entire complex. The irrigation sound went on, swishing in the night, dripping here and there, unseen and relentless. The crescent moon had an icy glow about it, so bright it was reflecting in multiple golden waves of the water below.

I stood there in my boxers and unbuttoned shirt, looking in the night. I felt so far away from the helicopter missions of the fire department. It was like a dream being there, fully aware of Seloren's presence right next to me, somewhere close by. I wished that moment wouldn't slip away so fast. I hoped that night would never end. It seemed enough to just believe it, and it would come true.

Despite the late hour, the atmosphere didn't feel cold. The usual contrasting extremes of the desert didn't entirely apply to the place where we were. The chilling temperatures were somewhat altered and softened by the tropical system around the ecological base. An entire environment of huge leaves, growing plants, sprinkling pipes and warm ponds kept a cozy mist in the night. It was refreshing and subtly energizing.

Seloren was browsing through some files and statistics with scientific formulas, under a neon lamp, sitting in a comfortable hammock, barely wearing anything except a long towel. She had just come out of the shower and I'd been tempted to join her, but I let her

concentrate on analyzing the results of the water and soil samples of that day.

I stood there at the edge of the terrace, watching silently the oasis that was hiding in the dark. It looked like a live being, breathing and growing with each minute. I could sense the movements of the leaves and I wondered if that ecosystem really had the power to change the entire planet in the next months or years.

Suddenly, her arms wrapped around me, holding me unexpectedly, slowly resting her chin on my shoulder. She had come behind me and I touched her hands, while our fingers interlaced.

"Have you finished sorting out that long list of scientific information?"

"Yes... "

"Is everything okay?"

"Everything's going great... water's clean, soil favorable for plants. Soon, the world will be brand new... And now I want to go to bed. It's been a very active day."

I smiled:

"We were very active indeed... I've been trying so hard to ignore you tonight and keep my distance, while you were busy with those files."

"Is that so? "

"I just tried to look away, so you'd feel free."

"You can stop trying now. I finished the list."

I turned around and she let her long towel fall down at our feet. Her eyes were shining in darkness and her smile was inviting,

irresistibly inebriating. I picked her up in my arms and went inside the room, while her lips found mine and we started kissing in the silken bed sheets, warming up to each other in the heat of the moment. This time, however, we took it slowly and each move sent us endlessly, magnetically into each other's arms, escalating the warmth of that embrace we couldn't get enough of, no matter how long the night ahead of us would extend. I yearned to get into her mind, reach the center of her soul and understand what made her the way she was, brimming with brightness, what motivated and enlightened her inner self. I had that insatiable thirst, a deep wish to find her beyond the physical appearance, beyond the appealing immediate touch, to guess what lifted her spirit higher, what enticed her heart to beat faster, what made her eyes shine and her soul rise with me, freely and wonderfully becoming mine while we were breathing together as one... I wanted to be a magical wand that would reveal what she really dreamed about, making it come true in an instant. I held her with the ardent desire of melting into her soul and letting her truth embrace me, overflowing her light in my heart, above and around us. Happiness made us invincible, attempting to surpass whatever invisible boundaries may have been between us, until we were absolutely sure it was love infinitely and harmoniously synchronizing us, alive and aware of each other's existence in a heavenly embrace. We discovered something miraculous in us being together, something that connected our energies in such a way that time could not erase or diminish the love we shared, undeniable like life, essential like water...

It gave us power, it gave us wings... It was like inventing a better world, setting it to a new beginning, to wake up in a better future. We were having the gift of love in a new universe that had just begun around us and was expanding irrevocably towards a promising, hopeful, liberated tomorrow. With each hour, we were getting closer to that certainty, heading towards a brighter day, an absolute dream that could actually come true and was gaining contour outside of the glass doors of that room where we were holding on to each other, at home and at peace, asleep and alive at the same time, in each other's minds.

The morning light found us ready to meet that new beginning.

It had become so natural and inspiring to see each other the first moment we opened our eyes. We enjoyed watching one another walk around naked, in and out of the shower where we didn't miss the chance to embrace under the water and warm up together, happy to make the most of it.

Soon, we returned to the helicopter. I almost didn't want to leave.

It was a sunny day and the palm trees shone their leaves in the fresh sprinkling irrigation.

I wondered if that tropical paradise would still be there... if it would expand and revive the desert in a few days, a few weeks or years, renewing the planet along with it.

"Is this going to change the world?" I asked Seloren while she was adjusting the seat belt before take off.

"Let's hope it will", she replied. "We can only wait and see."

"Maybe if we believe enough, it will come true."

I strongly believed it could. I was confident it would be a successful, positive new beginning.

I wondered if any unexpected turn of events awaited for us around the corner. I knew life was unpredictable, but I hoped our dream was already indestructible.

It wasn't set in stone, though.

It was a universe of action and reaction. Like any positive plan, it had adverse opposition from some part of the world. Groups of people were instigated by the CEO-s of the underground nuclear plants to think the new ecosystem was threatening to their lifestyle. The minds of many were living in a dark past, motivated by instincts of clinging to what had been established a long time ago, frightened by novelty and innovative ideas. The refusal to see a better future came from underground interests to maintain a damaging, questionable and disastrous status quo, for the profit of a few unknown company owners who spread a general false belief that things could not be any other way.

The chain of tropical island irrigation expanded rapidly to the cities, being highly efficient in nourishing a new ecosystem, and one thing led to another. Somehow, it was inevitable. When information about the source of technology at the desert base became open to public knowledge, it was immediately necessary to protect it by military force. Mass opinions swayed back and forth, clashing against one another each new day. It was annoying and hard to understand how so many people could be that narrow minded, on such a low level, to foster hatred against innovation. Conflict was just a click

away. It was like lighting a match near a gasoline spill.

And not only metaphorically, but literally too - there were many fires to extinguish. I had to answer emergency calls day and night, going on unplanned missions almost every twelve hours. Seloren and I didn't have as much time together anymore. She was busy at the lab or visiting other chain stations in the cities everywhere. I had to spray fire extinguisher over randomly or intentionally blazing sites. Other times, I would have to fly over crowds of protesters or erratic mobs, scattering instructions for them to calm down, along with information about the new ecosystem, that would convince them to understand what was happening. The world was changing very slowly and very fast, either advancing in high jumps or dragging its feet, depending on the part of it one would focus on. The Jeep that had followed me was still lurking in traffic behind me, every now and then appearing more determined to keep track of me. Whenever I took my motorbike out and crossed the city to go to the aerodrome, I caught glimpses of it in the mirror and sometimes I would have to speed along peripheral narrow streets to get rid of it.

Whenever I could meet Seloren, accompanying her by helicopter to new eco-stations, I found it hard to guess how she felt, what she was thinking, what she envisioned for the future. I needed to know what that was. The ultrasound waves had scattered most radiation into space, so she was doing much better, generally. Her memory, however, had returned in fragments and pieces, and there were things I knew she might never recall, that would remain forever in the past of what had happened between us.

It didn't matter, as long as we had a fresh start ahead of us. I was happy to have her in my life, in any way possible. Distance had made me more silent and thoughtful. Sometimes, I waited for her to speak... and not just a simple chat about the weather. I needed to understand what was happening in her mind.

"What is it that you want?" I asked her one day, while we were flying across the ocean, headed towards a new island where she had to supervise the expansion of the self-regenerating ecosystem.

"I want these problems to end... the social conflicts and the underground nuclear disaster."

"I mean what do *you* want? For yourself, not for the entire world. In your heart and soul, what do you wish for?"

She looked dreamily at the blue ocean below us.

"I'd like to be free to travel again. I'd like to go on a vacation with you... "

"Let's run away together right now", I smiled.

She laughed.

"And have them follow us and bring us back in shackles."

"It would be fun!"

"Yeah, for sure... "

"We never seem to find a way to be together in this chaos and turmoil anymore."

"I'd run away with you any day, Ky. But as the situation is right now... it won't happen anytime soon. It would be fun, as you said... but we won't get there. Not really."

I wanted to believe it was still possible. I wanted to make her

believe too:

"We'll do it. I don't know when... or where... but we'll get there. I wish it could be sooner than later. Anyway, it's never too late for love."

"It's never too late indeed... You already proved that to me."

"Because you showed me how it can exist beyond everything."

It was ours and yet it wasn't... It was always there, just a little bit further, slipping through our fingers like sand, as if it was a dream in a desert, appearing so real and still out of reach. Somehow, I felt a bit of remote sadness and I didn't want to think about it too much. I wondered if she felt the same, watching the endless ocean, so bright and shiny, yet so distant.

"You know," I said after a while, "even if we're not getting that vacation we dreamed about for so many years, even if we don't go away together one of these days, it doesn't matter. What matters is that we met each other again and we're connected in some undeniable and unexpected way. Nothing and no one will ever take that from us... It's ours forever."

"It's a nice thought." she answered, looking out the window at the endless expanse of water. "You may be right about that. But this forever you're talking about... I don't know..."

"Does the word forever scare you?"

"I'm not certain of anything at the moment."

"I'm certain of us. We make sense together. And time isn't important..."

I knew time stayed irrelevant. Distance was irrelevant too. I

wanted to believe we were winners. I was grateful for what we had found. We had discovered something more valuable than we could estimate, something that surpassed the borders of an unstable, unpredictable reality - we had found each other and no amount of time or distance could ever take that away. Having that love was more important than anything else that kept us apart, more powerful than any event that was going on in the world. It was above and beyond it, defying any obstacles, like the ocean spreading at our feet, to the endless horizon.

“Are we flying in the right direction?” she asked me after a while, glancing at the seemingly huge floating pieces of ice on the water, with a fixed shadow of doubt. “What are those icebergs?”

I stared down.

“I was given the coordinates for the new station up north. Maybe we can expect some ice.”

“There shouldn't be any glaciers in the ocean. Where did they come from? And where is the land? We should have been above Alaska by now...”

I checked our position.

“You know what, it's exactly where we are: above Alaska! But I see only water here. The land seems to have submerged under the ocean.”

We looked at the small piece of land that had remained uncovered.

“I should report this back to the base”, she said. “The heat from the chain eco-stations must have melted the ice up north.”

I noticed a snow storm approaching like a block of ice, fog and gray clouds. The blizzard was advancing fast. She tried to dial a few numbers, but there was no phone signal. I knew I had to land the helicopter, or we would crash into the ocean below. I used the only piece of solid ground available.

“Why are we getting down?” she asked me concerned, looking at the blizzard in worried apprehension.

“We can't go up there for sure. The propeller would become unbalanced or blow us to pieces. We'd be caught between the air currents coming from the south and the storm from the north. Our only option is to stay here and wait.”

“Could they send a rescue team for us? Can we go back to where we came from?”

I explained, trying not to scare her:

“We can't turn back now, there isn't enough fuel. We'd have to make a detour to avoid the storm, and chances are we wouldn't get out of it anyway. But we'll be fine, don't worry.”

I turned off the engine.

Soon, the blizzard enveloped the helicopter in a milky fog of ice and snow. The storm was shaking the glass doors and the propeller got torn and ripped into the air, disappearing in the tornado. The temperature inside had suddenly dropped to freezing point. I knew it would continue to drop, while heaps of snow were piling up outside the thin glass that separated us from the frost.

We were already breathing vapors that condensed in icicles on our eyebrows and eyelashes.

Seloren was wearing only a shirt and jeans under the lab robe. I sat next to her and wrapped her in my pilot jacket, holding her close to me. We were trembling and becoming more and more aware with each minute that the storm wasn't going to end anytime soon.

I grabbed the recording microphone from the helicopter log and started to report the situation.

Despite the biting frost and the howling blizzard around us, I wasn't afraid. We were together and I knew we would be fine, somehow, eventually. And if we couldn't make it out of that unexpected trap, at least I knew I had been happy with her, for the past months. I was content to share even that brief moment with her. I was peaceful.

"Here, wanna say something?" I asked, passing the microphone to her.

"No. I'm cold and freezing. I want to sleep..."

"You can go to sleep now. We'll wake up tomorrow in one of your tropical stations. You'll see..."

"And have a hot shower?"

"Yes, we'll be in the shower soon."

"How soon? I'm cold..."

"Very soon... just a blink of an eye."

I wanted to believe others would search for us and find the helicopter, but I couldn't get the transmission to provide a reply. I tried several times. Nobody answered. So I just stood there, holding her. She closed her eyes. I still looked outside. The storm was relentless, beating against the windows, encasing us in snow and ice until the

helicopter was covered by it completely. Then, there was silence. Deep silence and no movement.

“This is my last transmission”, I spoke into the recording log. “If you ever find it, know that we fell asleep happy to be together. Please don't separate us. Let us stay like this forever.”

My fingers were stiff and I let go of the microphone.

I cuddled next to Seloren, closing my eyes. I could hear her heartbeat in the deep silence. I focused on it for a while, until I could no longer feel myself inhale the icy air. Each breath turned into snow, covering us in a layer of dust, everywhere in the helicopter.

And then, there was just silence in my mind.

Chapter 4

Lovers' Hologram Museum

I woke up to the light of sunbeams coming from a window, and the smell of warm palm tree leaves. I could almost hear birds chirping somewhere and the lazy swaying buzz of life, beyond a distance. At first, I couldn't see much of anything... just light. Then, there was a contour of a white window pane.

“Hello there”, I heard a voice.

Someone checked my temperature. It was a nurse. I could feel electrodes on my temples, my chest and my ankles.

“You're going to be fine! Excellent”, she spoke again and her accent had something unusual in it.

I could hardly lift my head to look around. I felt a bit drowsy and heavy. I could hardly move.

“Take it easy”, she warned me. “It's been a long time. Your limbs need to recover and your body to adjust to the air and gravity again.”

I couldn't understand why I needed to adjust to air and gravity. Had I been in space?

My vision cleared up in a few minutes and I could see the window much better. It was an unusual round window. Outside, multiple devices were flying around. They looked like people in space suits, wearing backpacks with propellers and rocket lights. They zoomed in and out of sight, like tiny rainbows in the sky, drawing invisible paths

in the sunlight. Soon, I noticed they were sprinkling water from high above, on an endless valley that looked like an orchard of orange trees in bloom.

I wondered if I could be dreaming. I wondered if I was still in the snow, frozen.

I tried to sit up.

The nurse immediately placed the pillow under my head, prompting it against the wall. The pillow was weird: it took the shape of my neck and wrapped around it like a sponge.

“What is this? Where am I?”

“You're in a hospital in Alaska. We thought it would be fitting to bring you back to where we found you. The public wanted to see you wake up in the museum, but we decided it was better for your safety to defrost you in a medical facility.”

It didn't make any sense to me.

“What museum? What public?”

The nurse smiled.

“You're a worldwide event. You and your girlfriend... The Lovers Underwater. It's your Museum, that's where you stayed before you were brought here, to us. Your girlfriend is in the room next to yours. She's still asleep, but has been defrosted too, successfully I might add, and she's fine. You'll see her soon! Aren't you happy? Wow, I'm so glad to be talking to the underwater lovers! It's so romantic...”

“Why underwater? We were under snow!”

“Yes and no... your helicopter was swallowed by the ocean and encased in ice. It froze under the water. That was how your bodies

were preserved. The water saved you from weather damage. At that time, they didn't know how to light the spark in cryogenic subjects. We do now, obviously... You're the first ones to come to life after having been completely frozen. Alaska was covered by water then, but things have changed nowadays.”

I looked at the window.

“It can't be true... this isn't Alaska. Where am I, really? Is this another planet? Or some kind of heaven? ”

The nurse sat in a white chair that seemed to float like a crib around the room. At that point, I was sure I was dreaming and I was still frozen in the helicopter, hallucinating.

“I understand your confusion”, she kept on smiling. “However, it will become clear to you if you simply ask the right questions. The first one you should ask is not *where*, but *when*. You have woken up exactly one hundred and five years, two months and ten days from the moment you froze in the snow storm. This is the Earth that has evolved while you were asleep. It's not another planet, it's just a new improved one, with a perfect environment and system that sustains life in any form. The people who found you and your girlfriend frozen in the snow didn't know how to revive you back then, so they decided to keep you frozen until the precise technology was invented and it was safe to bring you to life in good condition. You had to wait an entire century to wake up again... slightly more than a hundred years. I'm glad I was part of that historic moment, the first frozen human subjects to defrost and set alive again! This happened one week ago. The process of defrosting took a few days. It needed to be done slowly

and carefully. For this purpose, you've been transferred from the museum to the hospital. Actually, we hardly call them hospitals anymore. They're just health clinics. People don't get sick nowadays like they used to in the past. Anyway, this clinic is much better for you than the museum."

"What museum?"

"I told you, the museum of Lovers Underwater, of course. You were kept in a frozen environment, a museum for the public to visit. It was dedicated to you. They didn't believe you'd wake up again, but hoped anyway... It's such a nice story to tell: the founder of the fresh forests and the pilot who flew her from one station to another, embracing forever under the frozen water... the world just couldn't let you go that easily. You were on display, frozen inside the helicopter for years... decade after decade... We wanted to keep you around... because your story was about hope, life, endless possibilities and most importantly, believing in love. And we need that, more than anything. We need to believe in love."

If that dream was true or just a vision, I knew it had started to make sense.

Either my subconscious was playing tricks on me, or I had really opened my eyes into a world of the future.

I looked around attentively. Everything seemed different in some way. Only nature outside was familiar. The rest was completely new: the room, the technology, the endless possibilities, as the nurse had said... the speech manners, people's appearance, the objects and the colors in the sky... even sunlight glowed differently somehow.

It had to be true: I was alive, in a new time and a new world. I felt like a new person too.

I wondered if Seloren would share my enthusiasm. *"We can have that vacation now... after one hundred years"*, I thought amused.

I didn't care if it was a dream or the new reality: I wanted to see her again.,

The nurse took a remote control from the glass table and the room suddenly filled with trees and colorful birds, flying around, brightening the room. An orange sparrow sat on the edge of my bed, a green parrot landed on the floating chair and a multitude of hummingbirds kept circling the lamp, while sunlight glimmered on the leaves and branches that spread across the room.

I almost sat up when a pigeon flew over my head. The nurse smiled.

"Don't worry, it's just a relaxing program for patients. Everything's a hologram. This is the tropical setting. You can choose something else, if you prefer. Here."

She handed me the remote control. It was a small sphere with a yellow and blue dot, blinking alternatively, like tiny eyes. My finger touched the yellow one and the birds vanished along with the leaves. Instead, fields of swaying wheat and rye covered the floor. Butterflies and bees swarmed happily in the air. Kites flew up to the ceiling, swinging lazily above my head in pastel colors.

I touched the blue button and the fields were replaced by turquoise waves, rising up the walls, turning into deep dark blue on the floor, as if it opened down to the ocean. Dolphins, whales and

goldfish moved swiftly across the room, floating by. I watched the underwater view before my eyes, amazed at how easily it appeared and disappeared when I changed the setting.

The nurse smiled:

“I'll let you play with it. I'll see you later to bring you some tea. You have to start drinking something and the first fluid will be some warm, calming herbal tea.”

She left and I sat up, adjusting my head on the melting pillow that changed its shape to make me comfortable. Browsing through the hologram settings, I came across a city street. Traffic lights and cars filled the room. And then, I saw a black Jeep rushing by. The image startled me: the car was exactly like the one that had been following me during the months prior to the freezing event. The Jeep advanced towards me and crossed the room, its wheels leaving no traces as it disappeared into the wall. I clicked on the setting and started it again. There was no mistake: its dark windshield, metal front like teeth made of steel bars, thick tires and four silver headlights – it was the same.

It dawned in my mind that something was wrong. The Jeep setting should not have been there, among the holograms. I looked out the window: what if the orange orchard was an illusion too? Something didn't add up. I had to find Seloren.

I got out of the bed. I felt dizzy and I paused for a while, leaning on the glass table. It moved sideways, sliding on the floor. I took my hands off it. I had to rely on my own feet only.

The hospital hall was silent and empty. I had an unexplained certainty that I was being watched from somewhere. I stepped on the

cold floor with bare feet. There was light under the translucent glass I walked on. I checked a few doors. Rooms were uninhabited: empty beds, dim light, windowless walls. I found her at the end of the corridor.

She was asleep. In the middle of the room I saw the lake that we had visited near the cabin in the woods, on our “honeymoon” trip. The shore looked the same. The mountains melted into the walls, cliffs stretching to the sky exactly as they were in reality.

I sat next to the bed, watching her sleep. She seemed so peaceful and content, I almost didn't want to wake her up. I touched her face gently. She opened her eyes and looked at me.

“Hi...” I said.

I didn't know if we were together again after one hundred years, or it was just a beautiful hologram.

“How did you get here?” she asked, half asleep.

“I walked through the door.”

She smiled.

“Of course you did... I feel I'm having a hangover” she yawned. “What did we drink?”

“Maybe water... or more likely, snow. If we believe them, we didn't drink anything for a hundred years. That would explain this sudden thirst.”

She wanted to sit up, but couldn't and let her head rest on the molding pillow.

She looked around the room, confused.

I was similarly uncertain of where we were.

"Listen, Seloren. I must ask you: do you remember me?"

She glanced at me sideways.

"What kind of question is this? I remember you, Ky."

"That's good. It's a relief, actually. What about this view? Do you remember it?"

She stared at the hologram in the room.

"I think I know this place from somewhere... isn't it the cabin where we spent a weekend?"

"Yes! Exactly. The mountains and the lake... did you arrange the room to look this way?"

"I was asleep. I didn't arrange anything."

I searched for the remote control. It was on the glass table.

I picked it up and started to change the settings. Suddenly, the walls became transparent and I could see a crowd of people beyond the room: unknown faces, eyes staring at us.

"Is this a hologram too?"

"I don't know. Are they real?"

I remembered what the nurse had said – if she was really a nurse.

"The Lovers Underwater Museum... We're there right now. We've been there this whole time!"

Seloren didn't seem to know what I was talking about.

And then, some people in white robes came into the room.

"You have to go back", they said and sprayed something in my face.

I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore. I felt my head go numb.

"Wake up, Ky! Wake up!" I heard Seloren's voice in my ear.

I tried, but my body didn't move.

“Wake up!”

I could feel her elbow nudging my shoulder. I started to open my eyes. My wrists hurt and soon I understood why: I was tied up.

We were in the Taxi together.

“Wake up, Ky! We have to get out of here! We're getting intoxicated.”

I couldn't believe we were back inside the Taxi we had escaped from a long time ago.

I broke the window with my feet again. I didn't know if I had the pocket knife in my jacket.

“Seloren, listen... this happened before. We got out and then went to the mountains and then to the artificial islands in the desert...”

“I don't understand what you're saying. You're having hallucinations. Try to keep your mind clear: how do we get out of this?”

There was an engine sound outside the garage. I looked through the broken window. The garage door lifted and there it was: the Jeep that had been following me. It stood there silently, on the driveway, waiting. I wondered who was inside.

And then, there was another question in my mind: had anything been real between me and Seloren? Had anything been a true experience, from what we had lived together? Had we gone through a program, from one hologram setting to another? At what point did it start a virtual tour of illusions, if everything was a display of our life, a

set up environment inside a museum for others to watch? Did she even love me? Was Seloren real, after all? Had she been a projection of the museum, an invention, a dream, an ideal from my mind?

I wasn't sure I could distinguish the moment when reality had turned into a series of incredible events and what part of my experience with her had been just a swirling dream. In what way had she been mine? How could I know if her heart felt something for me or it had been just a movie where she continued to play a role, set up in a holographic arrangement?

Suddenly, I was more concerned about Seloren's authenticity, instead of the Jeep that was lurking in the background.

I turned and looked at her. She stared at me, not able to comprehend what was going on in my head.

"Kiss me", I said.

"What?"

We were tied up, hands behind our backs. The Jeep was still waiting by the garage door.

"Kiss me,damn it!"

"Are you out of your mind? Is this the right moment for it, Ky?"

"Just kiss me, so I'll know you're real!"

"Can't you wait until we get out of here?"

"No! Do it now, and hurry up!"

"Okay, as you wish. Great place to make out, I have to say... "

She leaned closer, moving on the backseat of the car until her face was touching mine. I could feel her nose brushing my skin. Her head tilted sideways. I did the opposite thing and then her lips met

mine. We were in an uncomfortable position, but just the right one, in an unexpected way. Her mouth felt real, determined yet soft. She insisted to wake me up from my doubts. I kissed her and couldn't deny it was the way I knew it would feel.

We closed our eyes and when we opened them again, we were inside the helicopter that had been covered by snow. It was cold. I was freezing. She was wrapped in my jacket and we were embracing in the increasing frost of low temperatures.

"How did we get in here?" I asked her. "This was a hundred years ago!"

"It was twenty minutes ago, and I hope it won't continue like this for too long, cause I'm about to go numb."

"Don't go numb, you need to stay warm. We both do."

"And how are we supposed to accomplish that?"

I looked around.

I didn't understand why I kept waking up in different moments of our time together, but the silence of the helicopter, totally caught in snow, seemed clear and implacably real.

"Are you gonna ask me to kiss you again?" she said.

I stared at her.

"So you remember? You were in that Taxi with me, just a while ago, weren't you!"

"What Taxi? Look around, we're in the snow in the middle of the frozen ocean."

"Don't lie to me! You said we just kissed."

"Yes, because we did."

"And where did we do that?"

"Here. Right here, Ky. What's going on with you? Are you having visions from the cold?"

"I think I'm having visions from the future."

"I hope it's a future where you and I get to a warmer place..."

"I'm sure we will, but I don't know when exactly or what that place is."

I closed my eyes for a second.

I opened them and looked around again: I was in the hospital, covered by white sheets. The nurse took the remote from my hand.

"You'd better rest now", she said.

"What is this place? How long have I been in this hologram?"

She changed the setting and immediately dunes of sand spread on the floor. Ocean waves swept in from the door, moving back and forth under the glass table. I recognized the azure water.

It was dizzying and almost disheartening to jump from one reality to another only to see it disappear again. I felt deprived of something important, something essential that I had believed in.

"So was any of it real? How did I get in here again?"

"Everything was real", the nurse replied calmly. "And you've always been here."

"Since when, exactly?"

"Since forever."

"That's not an answer. And what about Seloren? She can't be a hologram too! I met her when we were teenagers! I knew her long ago... long before this museum anyway."

"I'm afraid perception is a relative thing."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You can't be sure of what you know, or what you see. You don't even know where you are."

"So where am I?"

"Wherever you want to be."

"You're not making any sense. I want to get out of here."

"Out is not an option. Inside, you can be anywhere you choose. Do you want the remote control?"

I wanted to find a way out of there. It was clear to me I was confined to that room, while Seloren was away somewhere else and the truth was concealed from us. I wanted to be free. I knew the remote was just a toy to keep me occupied, although, on a certain level, I wondered if it could actually be more than that. I also knew I couldn't rely on what I was being told. I was also sleepy.

I closed my eyes unwillingly, and another vision from the past appeared: I was on the balcony of the main building in the desert eco-station. Seloren was behind me. I could feel her arms around me and her head resting on my shoulder, while the irrigation pipes kept sprinkling water in the night, somewhere below us. I struggled to wake up: I knew, no matter where I went in the past, that I would still return to that hologram museum, or whatever it was.

The nurse had left while I had been half asleep.

I got out of bed. I could have retraced my steps to Seloren's room, but I knew I had to find a way out first, and then look for her.

I tiptoed into the corridor. There was an elevator door at the end

of the hall. The elevator was a glass chamber with illuminated screens on its walls. Numbers and words ran on the glass, bright yellow and blue, green and red. I randomly touched one of the screens and the chamber moved up, closing its doors. From one floor to another, I could see the metal skeleton of the building, steel bars and an electric structure that seemed a mess of complicated wires and platforms that went in many directions. The elevator stopped at the top floor. The glass chamber was out of the building, on a terrace. I knew it wasn't a hologram because as soon as the doors opened I could see the gray sky and the blizzard rushed in, freezing cold. The temperature was real. I stepped outside.

I was on top of the building, a concrete square with a wide circle for helicopter landing drawn on it. The most unexpected thing was that I didn't see anywhere the orange trees orchard, the sunny skies, the rainbows or the people in flying spacesuits. There was only water around, to the horizon and back: everywhere I turned, I could see only agitated waves and gray clouds. I was on a platform, in the middle of the ocean.

I returned inside the elevator. There was nothing for me to do on top of that platform. There was no helicopter and no way of getting off it. The cold atmosphere made it difficult to stay outside in just a hospital robe.

I made the elevator go down. I didn't know how to stop it and what floor I could find Seloren, so I ended up in the basement. The elevator took me to the bottom level. It was a big parking place, a garage that gathered many types of vehicles: boats, cars, small

planes and ski jets. I walked around, wondering if I could use any of them to get out of that platform on the ocean.

By the outside entrance I saw the Jeep that had followed me in the past. It looked brand new, with its metal bars like grinning teeth. It was shiny and silent, but one door stood slightly open. I looked inside: nothing unusual, just an ordinary car. Something about it though, seemed odd, for some unexplained reason. I noticed the hood of the Jeep was warm. Someone had been driving it recently. Where? I wondered, since we were in the middle of the ocean. I could hear the waves smashing against the steel pillars of the platform, below my feet. And an echo sound, as if coming from a tunnel.

I noticed a file on the driver's seat. I opened it and the first page had a few content titles with different years: *Following Ky report. Report of Ky and Seloren meeting. Keeping Ky away from Seloren. Journey to the surface. Prevent Ky from providing help. Find the USB, keep Seloren away from the conference. Nuclear underground shutdown. Alaska icebergs melting. How to prevent it: inevitable outcome. Helicopter transmission jam: the snow storm. Keep Ky and Seloren in hologram museum. Keep them frozen asleep.* I suddenly understood why there had been people on a mission to separate us: to maintain the power of the underground nuclear experiments, which her scientific analysis of the radiation had provided a reason for shutting them down. Somehow, I had always known it. And it didn't matter anymore: it was already a thing of the past. Or was it really? I wondered about the tunnel under the ocean. Where did it go?

"You shouldn't be down here", someone said and I saw one of the

people in white robes.

I knew I had to return upstairs to my room. I stepped away from the Jeep, leaving the files where I had found them. Why the vehicle was still warm, it bothered me. It had to have traveled under the ocean... to do what? What was down there anyway?

"Let's go. I don't want to put you back to sleep. You need to have your tea, it's waiting for you."

I walked inside the elevator and was taken back to my room, where they had brought a tray with a mug of herbal tea and some dry fruit.

I sat on the bed, sipping tea and munching pieces of dry apricots and pineapples, while the nurse changed the scenery to a bright meadow.

"Would you like some palm trees too?" she asked me.

"Yes, palm trees would be very nice. Thank you."

"We're here to make you happy", she smiled and clicked the remote.

Palm trees appeared in the corners of the room, one right by the bed, swaying its branches in the sun. I wanted to ask her why we were in the middle of the ocean, but she had already lied about it, so I didn't think she would tell me the truth. So I didn't ask. The window was obviously a virtual scenery too.

I had no idea what year it was and how far into the future I had been brought back to life. From the technology inside the building, it looked a lot more advanced than anything I had known before, so I figured something from what I'd been told had to be true: I was in the

future, more or less... yet what future? Was the whole planet covered by water? Was that building isolated, were there more of them? Was a nuclear base under the ocean? Were people living only among holograms, with remote controls in empty rooms? Was there always a storm outside, a gray sky, a blizzard blowing snow flakes and high waves on the water surface? Were there only dry fruit left?

Many questions ran through my mind.

"Your blood pressure is rising", the nurse said, looking at a monitor above my head, something I couldn't see behind me.

It must have been some device inside the wall.

"No need to become anxious. Your girlfriend is just in the other room, sleeping. And you'll be fine, both of you."

I focused on the tea, trying to calm down.

She smiled.

"There. That's better. I'll let you rest. You have the remote here on the table."

And she left.

Chapter 5

Flying into the Future

In the following days I started to sneak out of the room, learning to use the elevator. I went down to the basement a few times and discovered there really was an underground tunnel that opened under the ocean and probably went to some underwater laboratory, a nuclear bunker or some other experimental base. I could hear traffic and echoes of distant engines coming from beneath the waves.

I focused on going up. I knew my way out would be to fly away from the top, not descend in the complicated tunnels beneath the building. So I went to the roof a few times, looking for a place to hide and wait for a helicopter that I would take over. The only place I could stay hidden was behind the elevator chamber or right above it. A helicopter landed there once a day: I was certain of it because I could hear the propeller approach and then take off. The sound entered the corridors and reached the elevator, making me eager to get to it and escape. I noticed it usually happened around noon.

I wondered if there were dry continents left on the planet. I knew there had to be more buildings like that in the middle of the ocean, but I needed to know what was beyond the horizon.

One day, I visited Seloren's room again, just around noon, when I knew the helicopter would come to the roof and we could make a run for it.

She was awake, watching what looked like a scientific documentary running as a hologram in the middle of the glass table.

"Hey. How are you?" I asked her.

She didn't seem surprised to see me come through the door.

"I'm okay. And you?"

"I found a way out. We can fly off in a helicopter! We just need to go up to the top."

I sat by her bed. She didn't seem very enthusiastic about my idea.

"So how about it?" I insisted. "Don't you want to get out of this place?"

She hesitated before she answered.

"It's a bit too much for me", she said eventually, unwilling to elaborate. "I don't think I'm prepared for such an adventure."

I hadn't expected her reserved and reluctant attitude. She didn't even make an effort to move, to get out of the bed. She didn't seem to have the slightest curiosity for what was ahead of us. I wondered if the hospital confinement or the freezing-unfreezing process had influenced her mood and her mind to give up trying to improve the present situation.

I explained, hoping to convince her:

"I want to see what's out there. I want to see what this future can be for us. I'm sure there's a lot to learn and discover. I want to do this with you, but if you don't feel it's something you want, then I'm taking off by myself. I won't be here forever, to see if you decide or not. Either way, I won't stick around, waiting for nothing to happen. I'm

going out there. I'll take my chances with the helicopter. And it has to be now."

I paused, waiting for her to answer. She didn't reply. She was staring absently at the documentary in the middle of the room. Her blank attitude made me wonder if she had been given some tranquilizer.

"Seloren! Did you hear me? I'm leaving anyway, but I'd rather go with you. Are you coming?"

I extended a hand to her. I didn't want us to separate again, but I knew I would have to let her be if she didn't feel it mattered to her to join me. I knew there was a future for us in that new world, but I was ready to face it alone if she didn't want to risk flying away with me.

Finally, she looked at my hand, as if from a distance, while I was waiting in front of her.

"I'm sorry, Ky. I can't go with you."

That reply was unexpected. Where was the girl who had been willing to go anywhere with me, no matter what? I realized we weren't the same as we used to be, after having stayed frozen for who knew how long. But I was eager to live in that new world and somehow I hoped I could bring her with me, to that future of endless possibilities, an entire universe expanding outside the walls.

"I can't believe you're considering remaining here! Are you content with this lifestyle? Sitting around watching holograms?"

"What if there's nothing else but this?"

"Do you even remember anything before this place?"

She looked away.

"I'm not sure what I remember."

"We're not holograms, we're so much more than that! We're alive and there's a world outside!"

"It's unsafe. That's how I feel. It scares me."

"So you're choosing safety instead of freedom?"

"Yes."

"Is comfort better than truth?"

"For me, it is. I'm not sure what the truth should be anymore."

"I guess you need to figure it out on your own."

I could hear the sound of the propeller spinning somewhere above, beyond the hologram windows. She didn't move. I knew I had to go. I suddenly understood we had different views in our minds and we weren't on the same page anymore. I wished I could have convinced her to come with me, but I didn't want to force her into anything she didn't feel like doing. It wouldn't get us anywhere, anyway.

"I'll come back for you someday", I said. "Maybe you'll get bored in here and change your mind. I'll come back and tell you what's outside of your safety walls."

I had to hurry. So I rushed out, along the corridors and then directly to the elevator.

I didn't meet any nurses in the halls. The building seemed empty, like most of the time. I often wondered if the people were holograms too, but I knew at least some of them had to be real.

The helicopter was indeed on top of the roof, a silver shiny new model that I hadn't seen before.

I grabbed the handle to open the door and, to my surprise, someone was already there, in the pilot's seat. I looked at the helmet and the blonde hair flowing on her shoulders: it was a girl.

"Hop in", she smiled as if she was expecting to see me. "Wanna go for a tour?"

I sat next to her.

"Sure... so, you're allowed to take me for a ride?"

"I'm not exactly allowed, but not forbidden either."

She smiled a lot, so I wondered if she was a hologram too.

"So this is what women of the future look like."

"Like what?"

"You're stunning, for a pilot. I didn't meet any women pilots in the time where I come from. There weren't many."

She laughed.

"Well, there are now."

She started the helicopter. I looked at the flying board: bright screens that I didn't know, many blinking lights that I didn't recognize. The aircraft was perfectly balanced. It almost flew by itself.

While the building became a small gray cube, as we were gaining height, I kept staring at the wide empty ocean.

"Where are we going?"

"To the continent."

"So, there's a continent!"

"Of course there is."

She laughed again. Most of what I said seemed to amuse her.

"How did you know I would come for a ride?"

"I saw you the other day, lurking behind the elevator. I knew you'd be tempted to come and join the flight, sooner or later."

"Those people in the building... will they be upset you took me with you?"

"Not really. Don't worry. You're not a prisoner, just a guest. You can go wherever you want. I'll take you back, if you say so."

I thought about Seloren. Leaving her behind was like a claw in my mind, an upsetting, unfinished idea that something was not as it should have been. However, I had to move on, for the moment. I couldn't do anything for her by staying there. I wondered why we had been isolated from the outside new world. Being free seemed a simple choice.

"Why didn't they tell us the truth - that we can leave anytime?"

"They evaluated your subconscious minds and decided you're not ready for the outside world yet. The future is different from what you knew a hundred years ago."

I had no proof that she was telling me the truth, but I had to trust her somehow, since she was flying the helicopter.

"What about the underground tunnels? Is there a nuclear base beneath the ocean bed?"

She didn't reply immediately, but kept smiling.

"Well... it isn't a nuclear lab anymore. It's been inactive for many years. We turned it into a storage area. We keep equipment there and it's probably going to become an underground factory, if we can install everything properly. Actually, that's the reason you found my helicopter: I'm flying there every day to bring new stuff for the

construction site.”

I still didn't know if I could believe her. Yet I hoped she was telling the truth.

Soon, the water was replaced by land: green forests and solar panels shining among them, green fields and wind turbines as tall as sky scrapers, many flying devices like a swarm of bees in air traffic lines, floating screens, most likely holograms, that announced the weather forecast and music could be heard everywhere, coming from flying spheres that looked like disco balls.

“This is like a huge party!”

“It's not a party. Music is important for harmonizing the energy and the atmosphere. We control the weather with it.”

I was astounded by the many things I had to discover.

“So what do you want to do?” the gracious pilot asked me, while we were landing on a platform in the middle of a shiny city of solar panels, antennas and suspended gardens.

“I want to learn.”

“What would you like to learn?”

I looked around, fascinated.

“Everything.”

In the following weeks I adapted to my new life of the future. It was a wonderful world of miraculous discoveries and I enjoyed taking huge leaps ahead into my own evolution as a citizen of a better planet. Everything moved faster, appeared more diverse, functioned impressively, precisely and continuously improving. I updated my knowledge and was given the chance to be a pilot again. Those

helicopters of the future really surpassed my imagination. There were no accidents whatsoever, on the ground or in the air. Everything went smoothly, every second, in any direction. Technology was so advanced, it kept itself functioning perfectly. My life was suddenly taken to a new dimension, turning out amazing and interesting beyond my doubts. I discovered something new every day and was happy in that world.

The only thing that made me get lost in thoughts, from time to time, was the fact that Seloren had not been able to join me in that new life. I still hoped she could find the will to surpass her fears, get beyond those walls, regain her confidence in the possibility of happiness and enjoy sharing that new experience with me. I waited a few months, then one day, I decided to go look for her again, to try and convince her to come out of that shell.

I flew the helicopter over the ocean. I knew where the building was located. The hologram museum was actually a shelter for people who needed time off, to heal from something or reconsider their lives. They had unlimited available accommodation there, until they were ready to join the world again.

I landed the helicopter on the concrete rooftop. I recognized everything, but it also seemed like such a long time ago, even if only a few months had gone by. I felt I was a new man, full of energy and plans, ideas and joy to live in that new world of a future I had only dreamed of. I was much more confident and aware of how precious every day was. Life had become so interesting and uplifting. I felt energized and inspired. However, Seloren's absence was something I

couldn't forget about.

So I entered the elevator, descending to the halls, to reach the room where I had last seen her.

I wanted to retrieve her and bring her back to light. I didn't know if it was what she wanted, but I had to try. Somehow, I still loved her in some deep, undeniable way and I had hope that we could be together again, if we wanted it enough. Even if we had drifted apart, becoming almost strangers to each other, I knew there was a chance I could change that. The future was a miraculous place: it certainly had enough space to include the miracle of love too. It had to be an option still available for us, after everything we had been through together. I told myself we deserved to be happy in that wonderful world of the future.

I found the room and opened the door, but the bed was empty: she wasn't there.

I turned around. There was the nurse who had greeted me on the first day.

"Hello Ky", she smiled at me.

She seemed glad to see me again.

"How are you?"

"I'm good. Excellent, actually. I was looking for Seloren. Where is she?"

The nurse shook her head.

"Oh, she left last month. She was offered a job in a new eco-park. She felt better, so we let her go."

I asked to know the park location from the nurse's files.

And I went there. I had to find her. Somehow, I was glad she had gotten out of the hologram museum. I was glad she had found something worth doing, something that would make her feel alive and confident again. I didn't know if she still wanted to be with me, but I had to try and find out.

The park was actually a sort of a natural reservation. I found her outside in the sunshine, checking the irrigation system over some exotic plants.

She sensed me looking at her and turned around. The sun was behind me, so it was getting in her eyes. She raised a hand to make shade and see me better.

“Is that you, Ky?”

She wasn't wearing sunglasses anymore, but had some contact lenses that reflected the light.

“It's me. Wanna go for a walk? I haven't seen you in a while.”

She smiled.

“Indeed, it's been a long while...”

I was suddenly happy, just as I had been the first time we got together, in the woods, in the rain. I realized we had come such a long way in time, and we still meant something to each other. It was a valuable love that I didn't want to give up just like that. If there was anything worth saving between us, I knew we would start again and learn to be happy together, in that unlimited future of endless opportunities.

The water sprinkling from the irrigation system was spreading above us, making small rainbows in the air. She stood there in her lab

robe, smiling at me.

“So how about it? Let's walk together”, I said and extended a hand to her, as I had done the last time.

Only this time we were outside in the sun, breathing freely, enjoying our life and the future.

My words were almost symbolic. *Let's walk together* was an invitation that meant more than a simple walk in the park. It began with a few steps. A first step. I waited for her answer.

And then she reached out her hand and held mine, under the sprinkling light, drops of water from the eternal cosmic flow, an entire universe of endless sun and timeless love.

In that moment I knew for certain, just as I had known from the beginning, that we were simply lovers forever.